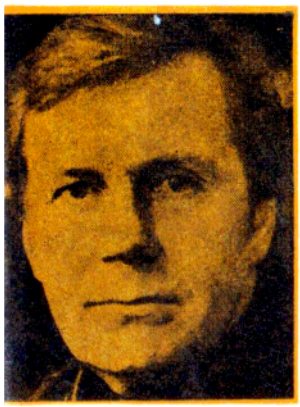
# THE NIGHTINGALE ECHO

New Soviet Stories



The writers in this collection belong to different generations, have different literary styles, treat different themes, and live in different geographical regions of the vast Russian Federation of the Soviet Union. Yet all five stories, published in the seventies, have been widely acclaimed by Soviet readers and critics, and in their moral quests, their attitude to the world, man and the purpose of art are characteristic of precisely this decade in Soviet literature.

Almost forty years have passed since the Soviet people's great victory in the Second World War, but this war is still not forgotten. It compels us to measure our past, present and future against it. In *Strastnaya Square* Nikolai Yevdokimov, who served at the front himself, traces "how it has ruined people's lives". Another writer in this collection, Vladimir Lichutin, stands out for his knowledge of the North Russian countryside, its life and traditions; in the fascinating dramatic clashes of *Serafima* he conveys the wisdom of its ordinary people. Nikolai Kuzmin is a great lover of sport which, to quote his own words, "reveals the true value of human life" (*Sweet Moment of Success*). Valery Murzakov, who appeared on literary scene after many years of a difficult and demanding profession of geodesist, condemns the spiritual blindness of an outwardly strong and successful man in *We Can Walk Now, Mum*. In *The Nightingale Echo* Anatoly Kim affirms the indestructibility of the spiritual element in human life and faith in the future.

These five stories will acquaint the reader with characteristic features of Russian prose in the seventies and some facets of the life and spiritual world of Soviet man.

The book also contains biographical notes on the authors.

# THE NIGHTINGALE ECHO

New
Soviet
Stories

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Translated from the Russian by *K. M. Cook*
Designed by Anatoly Kuznetsov
Selection and biographical notes by *A. Karlin*

ПОВЕСТИ РУССКИХ СОВЕТСКИХ ПИСАТЕЛЕЙ

**Оригинальный сборник**

*На английском языке*

## REQUEST TO READERS

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## Nikolai Yevdokimov

# STRASTNAYA SQUARE

What is the matter with me? Is it a sudden pang of longing for my distant youth or the first sorrow at approaching old age that makes me contemplate the past? Or perhaps the voice of conscience driving me back to those forgotten early years? But why conscience? Do I bear any guilt towards the person for whom I am now searching with such compelling pity? He slipped out of my memory long ago. I forgot him and did not think of him for many years. So now it is, perhaps, not to him that I am travelling, not him that I seek, but myself, the young soldier who already knew much of the horrors of war, but as yet nothing of the fear of loneliness.

What summons me along this unknown path to a person who flashed through my life in a brief instant? Why did I remember him thirty or so years later? Why him, in particular, that young lad? I could not recall his name or his appearance, but once having surfaced in my memory he was like a persistent, disturbing dream.

No, I bear no guilt towards him! Probably not. If we're going to talk of guilt, I bear it towards myself, the self that I was then, in those distant days.

Where am I going and why? What redemption do I hope to find? It is not guilt within me, nor sudden pangs of conscience—my conscience is clear—but a bitter, sad regret that the past cannot be undone. Now, of course, I know that I was shooting at myself then. It was one of those shots that at some time in his life each person aims carelessly at his own heart in confusion

or ignorance. At first the wound does not hurt, but eventually it is bound to make itself felt suddenly, like soldiers' wounds seemingly long since healed.

For a long time I could not remember his name. Even when I came across the remains of a tattered old address book in a pile of papers in my desk, with the address of a Victor Travushkin written in an unfamiliar, almost childlike scrawl, even then I did not realise who this Victor Travushkin was. It was only later that I remembered.

So he was called Victor Travushkin,* was he? Yes, his name was Travushkin. And I had not been able to remember this pure, sweet, obviously Russian surname that sounds so nice and good. A name like that could not belong to a bad person. People's names don't actually determine anything, of course, yet they hold the ancestral key to our characters. Travushkin, a pure, touching, defenceless surname, was surely born somewhere in the sunny meadowlands of Central Russia.

It is probably ridiculous to go off with an old address in search of a person who may never have returned from the war and, even if he did, will doubtless have moved house several times since then. But that is what I am doing, ridiculous or not. I cannot do otherwise, I want to go, although I know not why.

Yet nothing is really accidental, everything has a reason. This journey too might have begun at the very dawn of my life. Did it not begin when my mother first sent me out of Moscow alone to spend the school holidays with friends in a Caucasian village on the River Terek? I was so in love and wrote letters each day to the class-mate who had won my heart.

Looking back today I cannot say that the boy I remember was really me. I am not absolutely sure it was me, but nor do I believe that the boy was someone else. The boy and myself of today have the same name, and even some of the same memories. But he and I are linked by the knowledge of kinship only, and for the most part we are different people, probably even somewhat alien to each other. For me he is not my "self", but a kind of Boy, whom I would not even dare to consider a good

* *Trava* is Russian for "grass"—*Tr.*

friend of mine. Only by some strange accident of fate are we mysteriously linked with each other, which is why I know things about him that no one else knows, although people who met him and still remember him may know much that I do not.

I am still alive, but he is not. He has disappeared somewhere with his feelings, his truth and his falsehood. We are different and now completely alien to each other, but for some reason I still feel guilt and responsibility for everything that was said, done and not done by him.

Talking about him I say "I", although it would be truer to say "he"...

So I stayed in the Caucasus and wrote letters every day to the girl in my class with whom I was in love...

I was always falling in love. The first time it was at kindergarten. The little girl there was called what nearly all little girls were called in those days—Svetlana. She had long legs, golden hair with a blue bow, and a large red ball. In the late twenties a ball like that was a luxury, a precious object from abroad. In those days you could often see a dancing bear with its trainer on the Moscow boulevards, but a child with a rubber ball was a real treasure. Svetlana possessed such a treasure. She was a nice little girl and let everyone play with it. When it bounced on the ground, the ball gave a happy squeak like the lock of mother's old trunk under the bed in our room.

Apart from the name and the ball, alas, I cannot remember anything else about that little girl. And I remember the name because Svetlana fell ill and died. That was the first death in my life. I found out that people do not live forever, that they go away and do not return, like Svetlana with the squeaking ball went away and did not return.

Then I asked Mother:

"Do trees die as well?"

"Yes."

"And birds? And dogs? And clouds?"

"Yes, clouds and birds do. Everything dies."

"Will I die too?"

"I'm afraid so," Mother said. "One day."

"And you?"

"Me too."

When she said "me too" I felt a sudden pang of terror. This is one of my most vivid memories of childhood. I remember clearly the fear that shot through me. I remember even bursting into tears. What had frightened me so? I could not have felt the terror of not existing at that tender age.

I cried and Mother hugged me close in desperation and could not soothe me.

"Listen, I'll tell you a secret, she said, when I had calmed down a little. "Only you must never tell it to anyone else? See?"

"Alright," I promised.

"There is no death. Nothing dies, it just turns into something else. A cloud turns into rain, rain into grass, grass into a tree..."

"What about people?"

"Some become birds, others different animals..."

"And what about you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'd like to be a horse, a little horse in a green meadow."

"And I'll be a lion and look after you," I said.

Mother laughed and gave me a kiss.

Dear Svetlana, I soon forgot her. But I remembered her sometimes when Mother pulled her trunk from under the bed, turned the key in the lock and the lock gave a happy squeak like the firm rubber ball.

I fell in love in the first class, then in the second. I was always passionately in love with some pretty classmate or other. I did not notice myself falling in love and for a long time I would become the humble slave of the goddess who had conquered my heart. Then one day, and I myself do not know how or why, the goddess would suddenly turn into a grubby little girl with ink-stained lips and fingers. And another would become the goddess, and I would lay the gifts of my soul before her. I had enough sense not to declare my feelings to my goddesses and vow to be faithful, so no one could accuse me of being fickle or unprincipled. I changed my divinities, retaining my independence, until one day Cupid's arrow pierced my heart...

Her name was Varya, and she was the girl I wrote to from the Caucasus. She did not reply, because she was not in love with me. Yet I, even a thousand kilometres

away, could hear her voice and the rustle of her dress and see the flaxen plaits, two stiff plaits down to her knees. I was hopelessly in love. But she liked another, a boy from a different school, who was probably much cleverer, more good-looking and better than me.

She was a real beauty. I realised that I was not worthy of her. But I kept on hoping, although I had probably reconciled myself to the idea that being so ordinary I would never hear a gracious "yes" in reply to my despairing "Do you like me?" "No," was her constant reply. It was probably then that I first experienced my life-long sense of being second-rate, my distrust of other people's affection, because this affection could not be intended for me. "No," was my lot, and "yes" was not for me. A "yes" addressed to me had something deceptive and false in it.

The Caucasian house was near the railway, on Station Street. It shook from the passing trains that thundered along the rails, gleaming white in the sun, and gave a splendid whistle that none of the cyclopean locomotives of today with their standard whistles can manage. The steam engines whistled day and night, each with its own individual note, its own inviting song.

There was a lively little pup in our yard, with a tail that stuck straight up and wagged from side to side. Then there was a pig. It used to waddle out through the gate into the road and lie in a puddle all day. And a goat that would stamp its hoof and assume a militant stance at the sight of me: it was insulted because I used to imitate it and poke my tongue out at it.

At night the stars murmured and pulsed in the clear darkness over the village. In the day-time it was hot and sultry, the distant mountains shimmered in the heat haze, and the scorching Caucasian sun sent its molten rays streaming down from the dim blue sky. The fast-flowing Terek eddied and gurgled. The village smelt of dust and beer. Nasty flies buzzed over the numerous kiosks selling the local beer. Gypsy fires burned on the banks of the Terek. The gypsies went from house to house telling fortunes.

A young gypsy woman carrying a sick child came to our house. Her face was lit with suffering that gave it a dignified beauty—the face of a sorrowful Madonna.

The lady of the house took her out a piece of pie and a little money, and tutted at the child. But pie, money and sympathetic sighs would not make it better. I took out the medicine box that my far-sighted mother had put in my suitcase when she packed it for the long journey, and shook some red streptocyde tablets, which was very popular at the time and was supposed to cure absolutely everything, into the gypsy woman's hand. She immediately popped one into the child's mouth.

The child, my first patient, recovered. A few days later it was toddling along beside its mother, clinging to her full skirt. "Read your hand, fair lady, and tell you the future," she would shout gaily at the gates, and the small child would slap its bare, swollen tummy, like a drum, with its little hands, shake its shoulders and stamp its feet, trying to imitate a wild gypsy dance.

The young mother beckoned me to come outside.

"Come here and I'll tell you the past and the future. I won't take any money."

I could not resist and stretched out my palm to hear all.

The gypsy woman studied it, laid out the cards, and told my fortune. I listened condescendingly to her predictions. The things she told me! For example, that in a few days time I would get a letter from my wife; that I would die at about the age of twenty; that I would have two children; that I would make people better and have a long life, but would not be very happy. I would be sad.

It is not given to man to know the future and rightly so, for in lack of knowledge there is constant hope. To deprive a person of hope is to deny him the meaning and joy of living. The young gypsy woman went on with her flights of fancy, assuring me that every word was true.

"How can I get a letter from my wife," I asked, "if I have no wife because I'm too young?"

"I don't know," she replied. "It's in the cards."

"And how can I have a long life if I die at the age of twenty?"

"I don't know. That's in your life line."

There was no logic in the gypsy woman's inventions. And yet...

And yet I really do make people better, although in my

youth I never thought of becoming a doctor. That prophecy did come true. And so did another one.

That hot Caucasian summer I received one letter only—from the girl in my class with the usual bitter "no". A few years later I came back from the front and again put my sad question to her. The girl was amazed at my stubborn constancy and, although she said neither "yes" nor "no", she obediently accompanied me to the Registry Office. She probably felt sorry for me, because I was weak and tired, for I had returned not only from the war, but from the next world. The fortune-teller did not lie. I died before I had reached the age of twenty.

Everything came true. That's nonsense, of course. A young gypsy girl could not possibly outstrip time and peer into the cosmic emptiness of the future. Obviously many years later, remembering what she had predicted, I myself created the legend of her prophecy and believed my own invention so completely that today I am not even sure whether she existed or not.

But she did exist. And she did peer into the future, outstripping time, and predict me an early death and a long life.

I died early—at the age of twenty. I was barely alive, when my comrades picked me up after an enemy artillery bombardment. The outside world no longer existed for me. I could feel only my pain. The pain was lacerating. I could not bear it, and on the way to the medical unit I died.

Twenty years is quite a lot, a whole life-time. I did not see myself as a child, a young, immature boy, but thought of myself as an adult. It is only today, in my fifties, that I search within me for youthful feelings, deceiving myself with the tempting idea that people remain children right up to old age. But then, at twenty, I was only a little boy to my mother, and in fact knew more about life, more surely than now, when I am over fifty.

I died after a full life. I had known both joy and suffering. I had experienced the great purifying force of unrequited love—bitter, sad, but joyful.

No, it was not boys who died in the war. It was thinkers, young in body but mature in mind. They did not fear death. No one wanted to die, of course, but they all

understood their duty. Twenty-year-old boys died after experiencing one of the basic human feelings—a sense of duty to other people. This feeling is akin to compassion, responsibility, conscientiousness, but it is broader. It is the pivot of all these emotions, for it contains the meaning and secret of human destiny.

I was taken on a lorry to the medical unit. I could hear life disappearing. I thought of nothing, I could no longer think, only hear the warmth flowing away from me.

It receded slowly, and with it the pain. A sense of lightness, almost weightlessness, came over me. It was a marvellous feeling: after long suffering there was suddenly a tranquility, a moment which can only be called the enjoyment of true peace. No, I did not realise I was dying, but this enjoyment of peace actually was the moment of death. It is followed by emptiness, nothingness, non-existence.

So in the last instant of his life man is given the reward of experiencing, as he dies, not despair or suffering, but pleasure.

So it is not terrifying, the moment of death, but even pleasant. Here too we find the noble wisdom of nature. It is not the moment of death that is terrifying, but the expectation of that moment, the desperate, selfish thought that you will be no more and that life will not stop, but will go on as before. It is the sense of non-existence that is terrifying.

For many days I was nowhere, outside time and space. To be more precise, I was not there. On the hospital bed lay my shell, my casing, which the living called by my name. Then I returned from my long sleep—or short death, perhaps—from the void and began to feel pain, cold, and warmth, to hear sounds, to see the movement of light and shade.

This world to which I returned from nothingness had lost its name for me—I could not remember the words for objects and things, natural phenomena and feelings. I knew nothing of my past and present. Life was limited to the immediate sensation of peace or pain, hunger or repleteness.

I was taught to recall words and utter sounds. It was fascinating to learn that everything has a name. This object is called a "chair", and that is a "table", a "bed",

a "window". Outside is the sun. It is up in the sky. The sky is blue, the clouds are white, I have tears in my eyes and a heart in my breast. A bird is sitting on a tree. There are various sorts of birds, and this is the perkiest, a sparrow. My name is Kostya, Konstantin. I am twenty years old. My mother lives in Moscow. My mother. Mother! Dear Mother! I remember you, Mother! Once, long, long ago I learnt this word and after that I had always found tenderness, comfort and peace in the very act of saying it. Now I had returned to this word once more, to a source of life-giving strength and goodness. I called my mother, as I had in early infancy...

She was an unusual person, possessed by a single passion that gave meaning and joy to her whole life. Like others, she had a lot of responsibilities at home and at work, and she performed them with a will, being by nature an excitable, restless person, but the main thing that determined her character was love. For me? Yes. Actually, no. I was the product. But before I was even born this passion, this love, already dwelt within her.

I grew up not knowing for a long time that the blood of a secret love affair flowed in my veins, that I was the fruit of an illicit relationship, a joy and delight to my mother, sin and suffering to my father.

In fact, this love may have been a sin for my father at the beginning, but for Mother it illumined her whole life. To the end of her days she loved not the two of us, but only the one, him. She saw me in him, and him in me. I was him. That was why I had come into the world, to remind her constantly of the person she loved.

I bore two lives within me and did not yet suspect it, was not oppressed by the burden of this responsibility. Only later did I learn that I was keeper of the flame, that my life had been conceived as the repetition of someone else's life. I was not a person in my own right, but a piece of someone else, of that worried, grey-haired man who arrived twice a year from a factory town in Siberia.

Mother and I would go to meet him at the station. She used to drag me along by the hand through the crowded platforms, like a large doll, and I trotted after her, infected by her excitement, not knowing why we were in such a hurry. Mother dragged me along by the hand,

but did not think about me. She was no longer here, with me. She did not notice herself let go of my numbed hand, leaving me at the mercy of fate in the noisy crowd of arriving passengers and their luggage, the maelstrom of greetings, porters, sellers of pies and ice-cream vendors. When she let go of my hand, the primitive instinct of fighting for survival awoke in me instantly. I waved my little fists, clearing a path for myself, weaving in and out of people's legs, sometimes crawling on all fours, but never far behind Mother, who was flying along the platform like a bird to a man in a long overcoat and glasses, which he took off quickly as she approached.

Just as swiftly as she had sped along, she threw up her arms and flung them round his neck. I did not go up to them, but stood apart, as if ashamed of Mother's show of emotion, so unconcealed and passionate. I was embarrassed, not realising, because I was too little, that it was not artificial or done for effect, but the self-oblivion, the purity of deep, sincere feeling which Mother managed to retain over the years all through her life. I knew this man was my father, yet felt nothing but curiosity towards him.

We always took a horse-drawn cab home from the station. In those days, the early thirties, they were already on the way out, but had not yet been completely replaced by cars. However, both cabs and cars were a luxury accessible to few and quite out of the question for Mother and me. I regarded not having much money as the natural state of human existence and therefore never envied anyone with access to the good things of life that were forbidden to me.

But getting into the cab I was transformed into a different person, from a poor man to a millionaire. My class consciousness changed instantly, I became the king of the castle, vastly superior to poor pedestrians. I was bursting with pride, vanity, and a sense of happiness. So this is happiness—a feeling of superiority, self-satisfaction, a sense of being all-powerful, better than anyone else. And this "better" is achieved so easily, so cheaply—you just sink into the soft carriage seat and are no longer a slave, but a sovereign, with the world at your feet.

The carriage sped through Moscow, still almost empty at that early morning hour. The horse's hoofs sent sparks

flying from the cobbled roadway. Their loud clip-clop echoed resonantly. The horse snorted loudly, trotting lightly and gaily, its smooth, polished crupper visible over the cabby's shoulders, like the back of a great fish rising from the sea depths.

The horse's snorting breath smelt of the countryside, an unfamiliar smell for me. Country life was something strange to me, a far-away life where rich pot-bellied peasants fired at poor commune members with sawn-off shotguns, and where the first collective farms were bringing in the first rich harvests. They had taken us from school to have a look at this country life, like an excursion to a museum, so we could see for ourselves that bread did not grow on trees. We, city dwellers, did not know the countryside—for us it meant only holiday camps, supervised bathing in the river, bonfires at night in the forest, baked potatoes, scrumping in orchards, and a state of war with the local boys, an unruly, disorganised tribe.

So I grew up in the city and even as an adult for a long time I could not tell the difference between an aspen and a willow, lungwort and heart's ease, moss and heather. But all the same I was closer to nature then than my city children today, whose heads have been stuffed with technology ever since the cradle. My son's most terrifying recollection is of encountering a horse in a Moscow street.

Nikita was five years old. I had taken him out for an evening walk, when he suddenly shrieked with terror, at the sight of a prehistoric monster, and could not believe that this was a horse, just like the ones on television. This made me feel afraid too—that a species is growing up for whom the representation of real life, its reflection on television, is more real than life itself. For the boy the real horse was not the true one, he regarded the untouchable copy on the TV screen as the true one.

But why did I feel so afraid, looking at my frightened, deceived child? After all, are not delusion and disappointment, the discovery of truth and then further error and further recognition of truth, are they not part of the constant, inevitable maelstrom of life? The painful process of discovering for oneself the elementary truths

and rules long known to mankind—is it not essential for each and every one of us?

So the horse trotted gaily through early morning Moscow, carrying me intoxicated with my imaginary greatness. Its hoofs rang loud and clear on the cobblestones, like castanets. The carriage crossed Strastnaya Square and drove into the courtyard. I jumped down, as I thought, lightly and gracefully, with a sense of my own dignity, almost like the cocky young bourgeois characters I had seen in films about life before the Revolution and whom, as a good Young Pioneer, I had of course detested.

I would jump down from the carriage, casting a quick, furtive glance around the yard to see if anyone was watching me admiringly and enviously through the windows. And if they were, I was satisfied and played my role to the end, walking at a slow and dignified pace, with a self-important expression on my face, up to the door of our entrance. This had happened several times. But one day I jumped out of the carriage so clumsily that I slipped and fell in a puddle of old rain water. My only smart outfit—a blue sailor's suit—was immediately covered with mud. As I tried to brush it off and wept tears of humiliation, I could sense to my very core that people were watching me through each window of our six-storey block and, of course, laughing.

The show was over, the role of king of the castle had ended ingloriously. And it was only right that this tragicomedy should have such an ending. Does not all acting of this kind end in such a way? All deception, particularly self-deception, of course, is bound to be punished sooner or later, because apart from the laws made by man, there are the eternal laws of human morality, as strict as the earth's rotation, the changing of the seasons, life and death. Retribution may not come today or tomorrow, not for many years, perhaps not even in a person's lifetime, but it will come eventually, after his death, in the bitter memories of those who knew him.

My relationship with my father was a complicated one. It would be more precise to say that there was no relationship, which is why it was complicated. I put up with him, waiting for him to go back where he had come from. For me he was an alien body in the familiar envi-

ronment of our small room. He must have realised this, because he did not try to ingratiate himself with me.

He did not show affection for me. I did not want that. He merely observed me. He had sharp, keen eyes that always had a life of their own. His face would smile, but the eyes remained sad. His face would express lively interest, but the eyes would sleep. When his face slept, the eyes observed. His gaze was keen and searching. When it rested on an object, it seemed to latch on to it and become motionless, like the gaze of a blind man, which is directed not into space, but into himself. It was the gaze of a man accustomed to an intense intellectual life, whose brain was constantly at work, like a perpetual engine. At first this gaze frightened me, but then I realised that it held no danger, not even any external emotion. Concentration, attestation, but no conclusion. His eyes did not have the volatile emotion that gave vitality to my mother's face.

She was ten years younger than him. The year they met he built his first factory. This was in 1921, when she was twenty-five and he was coming up to thirty-six. He was married to an actress who was the first to play the part of a Bolshevik girl in Siberia, for which she was beaten up on the way home after the play. They had broken her legs and damaged her spine. Since then she had been bed-ridden.

Mother had also had a life very different from the one which awaited her after meeting my future father. She had been married and divorced. It was an unhappy, boring and empty marriage. She soon realised that she had made a mistake and she did not love her husband, although he was good to her and considerate, a nice person all round. He did not understand why she left him, and she could not explain that she had no strength to lie to herself. She did not leave him to go to anyone else, anywhere else, but herself. He did not believe this and looked for the most simple explanation—infidelity, another man.

We always look for a logical explanation of our own and other people's behaviour, as if such an explanation justifies the action itself. Yet very often decisive, responsible actions seem so illogical, so absurd, that it is hard to find ordinary motives for them. My mother could

never explain why she had left a husband and a home, where she was surrounded by love and attention, for her own solitary room and poverty. The first and most obvious explanation is that she went because she did not love him any more. But this explanation is more rational and clearer than any other only for people who did not know my mother well. I now realise that behind her desperate flight lay an instinctive fear of peace, that quietness of spirit which was increasingly enveloping her by the sober family hearth. The quiet haven never attracted her, all her life she sought independence—both outer and inner.

There was no elementary logic in her action. Yet for her this flight was more logical than if she had stayed with her husband. What logic is there in this journey of mine now to an unknown life, to look for someone I forgot years ago? How is one to explain this act, for which I myself cannot find the simplest explanation? Who will understand if I say that I myself do not know why I am going, but feel that I must? In the old days people would have said: "He is compelled by an unknown force." Today there are no more unknown forces, yet this phrase contains the most accurate explanation of many of our acts: "compelled by an unknown force".

An unknown force drew Mother out of the quiet refuge of her husband's home and made her go to university and fall in love with the married manager of a large factory construction project.

My father did not stay in Moscow long, only a few days, and he was out for most of this time. He had so much business to do. Even in the evening he would sit over papers or use the telephone in the corridor, to the irritation of the other tenants in the flat. He spoke in figures, not words. He had only a few words—"tons", "cubic metres" and "urgent". He spoke quietly, even softly, not losing his temper or using bad language. On the contrary, when he was annoyed he became completely impassive—his voice was icy, unpleasant and ruthless. I feared him at these moments when he put down the receiver and walked into the room: his face was cruel and frightening, the eyes narrowed and angry, and the lips stubbornly compressed. He would return slowly, with difficulty, from his thoughts to Mother and me.

Life with him was disturbed and anxious. All the time I felt that I must hurry off somewhere and do something. Our movements acquired a different, faster rhythm. We got up earlier, went to bed later and ate hastily, as if a breath of the tense life at the far-off building site where Father was in charge had blown into our quiet room.

For a long time after he had left we went on living at the same hasty rhythm which he had imposed on us. A strong smell of tobacco from his cigarettes remained in the room, but Mother would not open the window: she wanted to keep Father's smell as long as she could. Coming home, she would round her lips, half-close her eyes, and drink in the stale, stuffy air slowly, with delight, as if it were wine. "How nice," she would say, although for a long time the room had smelt far from nice.

She loved Father devotedly, with a kind of fanatical obsession. And he loved her. I could not understand why they did not live together. I could not understand why my father lived somewhere in Siberia with a wife he did not love instead of with us. He did not love her, of course, because you can't love two women at once. And although Mother said you can love two women at once, that people are bound by duty, and that Father would never leave his invalid wife, I still could not see why Father took pity on this one woman and not the two of us. For in being kind to her, he was being cruel to himself, to me and to Mother. Even after his wife died, he lived alone for almost two years, away from us.

I was thirteen when he finally came to Moscow and began to live with us in our small room. And when he began to live with us, I realised that all the time I had been waiting for him, had loved and missed him.

We did not show any affection for each other, but I felt that of all grown-ups he understood me better than anyone else. Not so much understood, perhaps, as was considerate of my feelings and moods. And I was not an easy person.

All grown-ups except my father liked laying down the law. They could not see that their lecturing was primitive and monotonous. Grown-ups are a different species, not hostile, but not friendly either. You need to employ

quite a bit of strategy to maintain your sovereignty, your independence. I found it more difficult than many of my own age: grown-ups were always telling me what to do. I learnt their advice, like the alphabet, and would have liked to follow it, but could not. I lived and acted according to other laws by which many of my friends lived and acted. I knew that you should work hard at school and could have done well, but I was a poor pupil, lazy, and without any particular preference for this or that subject. I knew how to behave in class, but did not behave properly. I was rowdy, talked, played noughts and crosses, stared out of the window, threw paper darts, day-dreamed or reflected on life. In the breaks I used to rush up and down the corridor like my son does now, smoke in the lavatory and carefully rinse out my mouth afterwards. I even drank some wine. Once or twice I drank with the lads from our block in another entrance or on another staircase.

I made my mother unhappy, realised it, and was sorry, but could not change my behaviour. "You're weak-willed, you've got into bad habits," my mother and the teachers would say. They were pained by their inability to put me on the right path. Yet I knew that all their talk—about me being weak-willed, easily led, and a slave of my baser instincts—was if not untrue, at least greatly exaggerated. I knew that I was a good person. Of course, I have my bad points, like everybody else. But they do not determine what I really am. A lot of the trouble arises because grown-ups do not understand adolescents.

I have never been critical of my mother and never blamed her, even when she punished me. She did not have an easy time with me, probably, and like any child I caused her a lot of anxiety. But I hardly ever felt guilty towards her, because my behaviour was not due to lack of respect for her. No, I simply felt that she did not understand me, did not realise that I was good, although I sometimes did things she regarded as bad, and that I was honest, although I often deceived her. It was she who was critical of me, she who saw more vice than virtue in me, but I never blamed her. In general I was not much good at blaming people. I never developed a very critical attitude towards her, other people or the environment in which I lived.

True, about the age of fifteen or sixteen I began to take more notice of Mother and Father—what they were wearing, how they moved and walked and what they talked about, although I had never paid any attention to this before.

I never saw Mother and Father quarrel, but I knew that they did sometimes. Over what? Why? They loved each other, didn't they? On these occasions Mother would conceal her mood from me and those around by pretending to be very pleased with life. She would smile and laugh in a way quite unusual for her. Father would come home from work and settle down with some papers in silence. Or go out for a walk. In general he was fond of wandering round the town on his own and would return, tired out, and say to an over-cheerful mother:

"Phew, how I missed you, Little Crocodile," kissing her on the cheek, and Mother would stop being so cheerful and become her usual self again.

"Little Crocodile" was the most endearing of all endearments. Why? I did not know, but I knew that this word united Mother and Father even at the hardest moments of their life. It may seem silly and sentimental, but the words "Little Crocodile" were like magic ones, as if they contained some kind of happy memory for them. Father not only bestowed this nickname on Mother, but also presented her with all sorts of toys, brooches, badges and other objects with crocodiles on them. The room was full of crocodiles, a whole collection, probably unique of its kind—many of them were older than me and had appeared in the house before I was born.

Father lived with us for about three years. Then he suddenly fell ill. Mother and I visited him in hospital almost every day.

He grew thin very quickly. Not just thin, but emaciated, as if his muscles had melted away, and only his skin, yellowing with a sickly transparency, covered his bones. Father's big head became small like a child's, his eyes and nose grew sunken and his cheek bones protruded. He covered his body with his thin arms.

The cancer was devouring him quickly, and now everyone knew that he would die in a month, a week. He also knew that he was dying, leaving us alone once more.

When we came to see him the last time he pretended it

was all nonsense and kept smiling and calling Mother by her favourite nickname. Mother also played the game "as if nothing had happened". She told Father lots of rubbish about the spring weather and our co-tenants in the flat and passed on good wishes from friends and people at work. She even laughed her "happy" laugh, but then... Then she broke down and burst into tears. She pulled herself together immediately and began apologising for her momentary weakness.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know myself why I'm crying. You'll get better soon..."

"Don't, Little Crocodile," he said. He tried to stroke her head with his weak hand, but could not. "There's so little time left, why deceive one another, I shall die today..."

He smiled as he said it, and I was frightened by the calmness of his sick voice, in which there was neither sadness nor a sense of resignation.

"No, no," Mother whispered in horror.

"Yes, my dearest, we make so many mistakes in our life-time, do all sorts of nasty things, big and small, and often deceive ourselves and others too. There must be a punishment, mustn't there. Eh? And the punishment is death..."

"My goodness, what are you talking about!" Mother exclaimed in despair, for some reason shielding me from father. "You're a fine person," she said, weeping. "I'm happy with you, we both love you... Kostya, dear, tell your father how much we love him, tell him, please!"

She looked at me beseechingly, despairingly, but I could not utter a word. I was petrified. Mother was asking me to say some parting words of affection to my dying father, and I could not open my wretched, dumb, stupid mouth where all the words had got stuck.

"Let's not get sentimental," said Father affectionately. "I'm a bit tired. You go now and I'll have a sleep."

Mother kissed him and nudged me to kiss him too, but I held back. It wasn't easy to lean over and put my mouth to that sick, now almost strange, unfamiliar face. I held back, and Father understood immediately.

"Off you go," he said in a joking voice. "No sloppy embraces. Cheers, lad!"

"Cheers!" I replied, and we left.

An hour later they rang home to say that Father had died.

The nurses gave Mother what was left of the fruit and food she had brought, the books he had been reading and a notepad. The notepad was new and empty. There was only one entry in it. I shall never forget what it said. I hid it in a secret place so that no one should ever read Father's last words, which were written for himself alone, not for anyone else, even Mother and me.

"A natural death is fair. I have always feared death. In the Civil War, from a bullet at the front, then from all sorts of illnesses. Now I understand that it is necessary. Necessary so that life does not begin to rot. It is hard to say goodbye to the birch trees, the sun, the snow, the wife you love, your work, your son, but it is necessary. How I want to live! But I must die to clear the way for others who will come to live on earth—my son's children, my grandchildren, the people of the future. One must die for life to be eternal."

Father was cremated.

The crematorium was cold and solemn. The huge, empty, echoing hall with father's coffin in the middle was in semi-darkness. There were strains of mournful music coming from somewhere. Glancing up I saw three musicians, two men and a young girl, playing violins.

The girl looked at me. She probably realised that I was the dead man's son and gave me a sympathetic look, not just a blank stare.

I should have been thinking about my grief, my father whom I was seeing for the last time, but I suddenly began thinking about the girl, that she was probably not yet used to seeing other people grieve, which was why she was so sympathetic. I began to cry because of her pity for me, the son of a father she had never known, because her music made me weep.

The tears choked me. I did not hear what Father's friends and workmates were saying over his coffin. I just kept thinking what a dreadful, rotten, hopeless person I was. Even now, beside my dead father, I was thinking about something quite irrelevant, instead of what I should have been thinking. I wept, but seemed to see myself through someone else's eyes: "How upset he is. How he loved his father." And pitying myself as

if I were one of them. Yet at the sam time I was haunted by the terrible thought that my father had died bearing me a grudge. Had it really been so hard to lean over and kiss him in the hospital? But I had not done it. I stood there rooted to the ground, like a pillar of salt, with my father dying and aware of it. That was why he had told Mother and me to leave, so we would not see his final agony.

Such were my thoughts as I stood beside the coffin. Never before had I experienced a sense of guilt. I did not know the feeling, because what I had previously thought of as guilt at deceiving Mother or Father, at not doing my homework, playing truant and many other minor and not so minor misdeeds, was not guilt at all, because it lacked a sense of responsibility, which comes to a person only with time.

The speeches ended, the people walked up to the coffin, leant over and kissed Father on the forehead. I did not hurry. I was waiting for everyone, the relatives and friends, to finish their farewells, waiting to be the last to kiss Father, so that my kiss would lay on top of all the others. When they had finished I went up to the coffin and stood alone with Father, just the two of us, in the huge, echoing hall, I felt with all my being the injustice of what had taken place. Death is a great injustice. It is absurd because it seizes indiscriminately anyone who comes within its grasp. How many bad, mean, nasty people were still alive, while my father whom I had found and understood so late was lying in his coffin.

I leaned over and kissed his forehead. It was hard and cold as stone.

The coffin began to sink down under the floor, into an abyss, the underworld, silently, slowly, forever. It disappeared. The floor panels closed and the music stopped.

...Father was dead, but a funeral is not a final parting. It was impossible to part with Father because our room was full of him. Nothing said that he was here, that everything was waiting for him, as much as the sense of emptiness. Life in the room had stopped, hushed, the objects were orphaned, unnecessary. He had lived here such a short time, just over two years, yet every object seemed full of his spirit.

Mother went to work and I to school, but these were mechanical actions which no longer had any meaning. Why go to school and do homework, why hurry to work in the morning and come home in the evening? Just to go to bed, sleep through the night and set off in the morning again? Why, if the same fate awaits one and all, old and young—death?

This thought gave me no peace. I would think it going to school and sitting in class. From morning to evening it was the same. What is the meaning of life? Why do people live? Well, why do they?

No one knew the answer to this question—neither books nor people. Everybody knew how one should live, but nobody knew why.

There was a kind of absurdity in the maelstrom of life that continued steady and unchanging, as when Father was alive—the trams and trolleybuses were still running, the bakeries were selling bread, the stands beer and vodka, the kiosks newspapers, and the tap in the kitchen was still leaking. Perhaps this senseless, hectic earthly life is after all only the threshold of another, everlasting life which awaits us beyond the grave? Surely there cannot be nothing there at all. And what does "nothing" mean?

In Strastnaya Square where the Armenia shop now stands there was an old church. Its days were numbered, but services were still held there. It had never occurred to me to go inside, even out of curiosity. Why should I? I knew perfectly well that there was no God, that religion was the opium of the people, and that in churches crafty priests made fools of simple believers. My mother did not believe in God either, nor did she go to church. But after Father's death for some reason she decided to go and took me with her.

The inside of the church was in semi-darkness. It was stuffy, cramped and packed with people. Behind a barrier a woman who looked neither old nor young was selling candles. She explained to Mother where you put them for the dead and for the living. Mother bought three candles and began to make her way through the crowd to a big icon showing a thin old man with a kind, angry face, probably one of the main saints. Mother lit one candle for Father and one for me. Then I had to light

one for her. I stood it with the rest, but it went out. So I lit it again, but again it went out... Only at the third attempt did it flare up with a steady flame. The shadows from the candles danced on the large icon, flickering with the movement of the air. Mother's candle burned brightly and quickly, but I could not help feeling worried. Why wouldn't it light at first? Why did it go out twice? Although I was firm in my convictions and did not believe any fairy stories, I still felt ill at ease.

A choir sang in the corner—three women and three men. The women looked quite ordinary, and the men were just like anyone you might see in a tram, in the street, or in a queue. There was nothing church-like or pious about them: they were just ordinary office-workers, dressed in ordinary clothes, almost carelessly. Tired from singing, they had a break for a few minutes, whispering about something and coughing quietly. The woman behind the barrier was also quite ordinary, like a waitress.

The superstitious fear aroused by Mother's candle did not leave me. Mother had probably not noticed, but I could not forget how her candle had gone out next to Father's, how determined it had been not to live. All that day and the next, and for many more to come, I could not help feeling sorry for Mother when I spoke to her or looked at her.

Father's death seemed to have slowed her life down. She moved without haste, almost reluctantly, and was absent-minded. But the strange thing was that grief seemed to have lent her features a kind of dignity, and Mother, who was a very ordinary, unstriking woman, became beautiful. Her sad face grew somehow refined.

One day in a toy shop I saw a rubber crocodile. It was wearing a hat and had a pipe in its smiling mouth, a jolly, friendly crocodile with a funny long tail which it was sitting on like an armchair. A real Totosha from Chukovsky's poem. It was not expensive, so I bought it and gave it to Mother. She smiled, picked up the crocodile in both hands, and stared at it for some time, then put it down on the sideboard—a little apart from Father's crocodiles. It was as if she had accepted the baton of Father's game from me, but did not want to mix up the past with the present.

Then one day an incredible thing happened. I came

home from school and could not recognise our room. The furniture had been changed round, Father's bed had gone and so had the crocodiles. It was a different room—the same things now in different places seemed to proclaim loudly that the person who had lived there not so long ago had gone, he was dead and there was nothing left of him...

Mother had almost finished scrubbing the floor. She looked at me, smiling and brushing the hair from her forehead and eyes with a wet hand. She understood my astonishment, my unspoken question:

"Life must go on, son."

And smiled again.

I shall never forget that smile. It was not a tormented smile of grief, sorrow, concealing guilt or embarrassment. No, it was a gay, easy smile.

I could not understand what had happened. She had removed the crocodiles she always played with, put them out of sight. She had let fresh air waft Father's spirit, breath, memory out of our room. I wanted to shout, "How could you!", thinking that the love she had demonstrated so openly all the while was just a game, a long act. I despised her, astounded by the discovery of her pretence. I was sixteen then and very categorical, unable to tell truth from falsehood. I said nothing, and ran out of the room.

With time however I realised that I had been unjust in blaming Mother and misunderstanding her smile that day. She was not being unfaithful to him, the dead man. She loved him as if he were alive, and she had no need of external things to remind her of him. Each evening she sat down at the table and wrote something. I did not know what. Only later, returning from the war, did I read what she had written. For many years, day after day she wrote letters addressed to no one, full of warm tenderness for the man who died long ago...

Yes, life was gradually returning to me in the hospital. It began with learning words. In my earlier life I had not known that words were living organisms, not empty sounds. I studied their essence, as if examining them under a microscope. Oblong, square, triangular, sweet, sour, yellow, blue, red, soft, hard, transparent, impassive, slippery, rough—they had a life of their own. The strong

devoured the weak, two joined to give birth to a third, the young erased the old, word groups and single words intermingled.

I would catch one word, then another, and put them side by side. They fell into line like soldiers and made a sentence. I said it aloud and it flew off into space. But it did not die. I found out that words do not die or disappear. A person can die, but a spoken word cannot.

Not only life returned to me in the hospital, but also words uttered a long time ago by me. Where do they live, the words spoken by people? Where are they kept? Where do they lie in wait to return at a certain hour and prick our conscience? How many words I had tossed about carelessly and was ashamed to remember. After all, I might have died and they would have gone on living here, on earth, amid other people!

I was sometimes taken out into the hospital courtyard to sit in the warm sun. The yard was empty. There was a young tree with leaves that turned on their thin stalks and flapped against one another. I sat under the tree with the sun at my feet, and my newly acquired words and concepts sang and murmured round me. I played with them, light and obedient, like a juggler in a circus.

That's a spider crawling, and there's an ant running and a butterfly flying—everything has a name, everything is ordered. I was full of words, they threshed about inside me like fish in a small pond.

My memory and *joie de vivre* were returning. Then suddenly one day I remembered what preceded my death...

It was a misty morning. The Russian village of Skit was in flames, but even then the Germans would not leave it. First the tanks plunged into the furnace, then we, the infantry. I ran as far as the first burnt-down house and suddenly came face to face with a German. He was standing a foot or two away from me, holding a pistol in his outstretched hand. "This is the end," I thought, realising I would not have time to lift up my sub-machine-gun and fire. He shouted and narrowed his eyes—I saw him close his eyes tightly—then fired. It seemed like an age as the bullet sped towards me. I waited for it, petrified, saying goodbye to life. At last it entered me somewhere near the shoulder. I felt no pain, but realised I was still alive and should get a move

on if I wanted to stay that way. I raised my gun and fired all the bullets left in the cartridge at the German. I killed him at once and did not have time to jump out of the way. He collapsed onto me, catching my uniform and dragging me down. I pushed him off, and his warm, sticky blood trickled along my fingers. He was already dead, but something was still moving in his body. I saw his face, still almost alive and not dead. It had not had time to reflect either fear or pain. It was a peaceful face, not distorted by a dying grimace. Slightly surprised eyes, a half-open mouth, white teeth, grey hair, a wrinkled neck. He was not a young man, old enough to be my father, and he did actually resemble him a little. He had clutched me, and I could not throw him off. I managed to eventually and staggered away, wandering round the village, past the burning houses, seeing and hearing nothing.

I had killed an enemy. I had performed a noble, heroic deed. I was defending my country and that was why I had killed an enemy, committing a just act of retribution.

I staggered along, writhing from the pain in my stomach, and felt my bile rising, but could not vomit. I was shuddering with horror. I had just killed a man.

It was not my first day in the war and I had already killed quite a few enemy soldiers, no doubt. But I had always fired at them from a distance, from one trench to another, as if into space, at some abstract target. Now I had killed staring at the face of a live man.

Why had he come here, to this Russian village, an elderly man who had left a home, a family, a wife and children on German soil? Why had he made me kill him?

I fell on all fours, writhing and choking in my vomit. Then I heard a shell, covered my head with my hands and felt an avalanche of earth thud down on me...

This is what preceded my death and what restored my memory in the sunny hospital garden...

My seclusion in the garden was usually interrupted by a young lad from another ward. He had a high forehead, an incredibly wide, smiling mouth and a long, sharp nose like Pinocchio's, and irritated me with his persistent familiarity. He would sit down beside me and

start talking, but I would brush him off and walk away, without listening. And his name was Victor Travushkin.

I can still remember his warm smile, his childish, puppy-like trust and compassion. It was as if he had searched all over the hospital for someone to pity, to help, to attach himself to, and had chosen me. He tried so hard to win my friendship, reciprocal smile and affection, but I would neither smile at him nor be friends with him.

Why did he pick me, why did he look at me with such dog-like devotion that I remember his expression to this very day? I gave him the cold shoulder. He did not interest me. I thought I was intellectually richer, and he was simple and uninteresting.

If only we could turn the clock back! Today I remember with bitter regret the boy's selfless devotion, his pure, sincere eyes. Dear Victor Travushkin offered me the goodness of his heart, and I carelessly rejected it. How often recently, after so many years, I have thought in moments of loneliness and sorrow that I have never encountered such true friendship in all my life.

Remembering who I was, reacquiring my original name, and returning from that other world, not dead, but also not living, to my former shell, I began to get used to living like everyone else, gradually forgetting the sensations and discoveries of my long sojourn in that other dimension. Finally, when my mind was running along the right track and no longer threatened to depart from the established order, I was told that I would soon be discharged and given indefinite leave to go home to Moscow. To Mother. To Varya and my former joys and sufferings.

My love for Varya had appeared so suddenly and, I thought, at such a bad time. The despair at my father's death had still not receded, the pain and sense of guilt towards him had not abated, when I first saw her.

In fact I had seen her every day for so many years, because we were in the same class, that I seemed never to have noticed her as if she had been there, yet not been there, as if I had seen her, yet not seen her.

But what was fated to happen, took place on a sunny day in spring. Varya was sitting at the long desk on her own, by a large window with the sun streaming through,

and she was melting like a white snowflake in the heat. From where I sat I could not see her alone, because the girl who sat next to her usually blocked my view. But that day her neighbour was away, and Varya sat alone at the long desk by the window.

I noticed her quite by chance and only because the teacher began to check who had done the homework and everyone looked the other way. I had not done the homework either, so I looked the other way too. And saw the girl sitting by the window on her own.

It was not the Varya I knew, but a new, somehow different girl. Actually I was looking straight at the sun and saw not her, but a kind of dazzling cloud full of light. The cloud was shining with a bright light, reflecting and giving off radiance. I was blinded by the brilliance and looked away straight into the eyes of the teacher.

I remember the teacher's eyes and face at that moment. She was about to ask me a question and had opened her mouth to say my name. But she did not ask it. Probably she could not have explained why. But now I think I know. It all happened so quickly and subconsciously, that although the teacher did not realise it, she must have sensed with her good, innermost feelings that it would be wrong to distract me from what was maturing in my heart. I did not realise what had happened either, although my eyes probably already showed faint signs of my budding affection.

I half-closed my eyes against the glare of the sun, then looked at the girl again. Now I saw her flaxen hair, each tiny strand with a gleaming life of its own. One arm was quietly warming itself on the sunny desk, while the other, the left one by the window, shaded her eyes from the sun with a hand as thin and transparent as parchment.

The teacher asked her a question on the homework. The girl stood up, turning her back to the window and the open sky, and I saw her freckled face, the familiar face that I had known for years yet never really noticed, and would not have noticed today if she had not looked down, moving her long lashes. She looked down again and up, and that was all. There was nothing else, only this movement.

Time passed, minutes, hours, days, for everyone else

life continued its usual course, and I seemed to be part of it, yet apart from it. I lived cherishing the moment when Varya had fluttered her eyelashes. This moment had not slipped or melted away, but had become transfixed. Not as a memory growing fainter with each day, but as a living body, a swelling bud, developing and pulsating.

I thought of her constantly, ashamed of my thoughts and hiding them from everyone. I was ashamed of this sudden love because I seemed to have forgotten Father. I wanted to think about him, not Varya, for so little time had passed since his death. So little time, yet I was already living with new feelings, forgetting my duty to his memory. But I could not help thinking about her.

I loved her. One evening I waited for her at the entrance to her block and told her so.

"Yes, but I don't love you," she said with a gloomy finality.

At first I did not realise what had happened. I was bitterly upset for a moment, then mastered this feeling and said: "Love cannot be compelled." I stretched out my hand. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," she said, putting her hand in mine. Her hand was warm, delicate and gentle. My head swam from the touch. I caught her hand and would not let go. She stood there submissively, eyes downcast.

Then, without knowing or believing that I was capable of such a thing, I bent over and kissed Varya on the cheek. What name can I give to the feeling I experienced when my lips touched her cheek? Only later, in hospital, did I realise it was like the sensation I had when I died in the lorry on the way to the medical unit.

I stood there, confused and amazed at what had happened, and could not pull myself together for a while. But Varya's face changed, and she rubbed her cheek hard where my lips had touched her, as if trying to erase the kiss.

"Silly thing," she said and ran off.

She did not love me, she could not bear me, and she showed it now all the time, by movement, word or look. She loved another boy from a different school with the same name as mine—Konstantin.

...I did not know whether I wanted to see her again

when I left hospital. To see her would be to return to my old heartache.

It was late summer. The sun was shining and the leaves were already turning. I knew I would soon be discharged, for I was quite healthy again now. So healthy that I was already stealing a kiss from our ward nurse Zina whenever I caught her in a secluded spot. "Ooh, you sloppy thing!" she always exclaimed, but not very convincingly, because she always snuggled up to me, brushing my face with warm lips. Her lips were sweet and intoxicating. They made me drunk and I could not pull myself away from them. "That's enough, silly," Zina would say, "you're not supposed to have any strong emotional experiences."

I was in love with her, of course, although the other love, for Varya, dwelt in me constantly. I did not write to her and knew nothing about her, but I thought of her. She was not my past or my present, not a memory or a dream. She was simply within me, a part of me. Zina and Varya existed on different planes, different dimensions. The one earthy and substantial as bread, the other othereal as a spirit.

But the earthy and substantial Zina was a sly one. She found quiet spots but with plenty of others, not only with me.

"Don't be jealous, silly," she would reassure me. "I'm just playing around with them, you're the real one."

She would laugh and tap her temple, meaning "you're crazy to imagine a thing like that". Then blow me a kiss and go off, leaving me raging with jealousy. She assured me so gaily and sincerely that she was faithful, that I believed her although I went on feeling jealous. She was a light-hearted easy-going little thing, lively and quick. She had a lilting laugh which needed no prompting, she danced and sang "Oh, little student girl", her favourite song, and she gave injections quickly, without hurting at all.

One night I woke up with a headache, an excruciating throb in the back of my head, and dragged myself out of the ward, calling for the duty nurse. The nurse on duty was Zina, but she was not at the usual table in the corridor, so I went to look for her. I pushed the door of the doctor's office and it swung open, revealing Zina

and another fellow lying on the couch, embracing. I ran back to the ward, feeling sick with shame.

Next morning she said to me:

"What's up with you, funny face? Eh, what is it?"

"How can you lie like that? I saw you..."

She laughed.

"You didn't see anything, crazy."

"Yes, I did," I retorted, hating her, but still believing her and not my own eyes.

"Well, what did you see then? Nothing happened."

"Yes, it did. Everything! Don't lie."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," she even crossed herself. "I've never done anything like that with anyone. I'm not that sort."

She said this proudly and walked off in high dudgeon. So I was the guilty one. For a moment I was ready to apologise, but did not. I wanted to believe her, but I could not. I believed myself.

From that day onwards I despised her, that lying, promiscuous girl, but she felt no remorse. She was full of life. It bubbled up in her like a spring, and her quick, light laughter rippled all over the hospital. She would give me pitying looks and say some affectionate words, but I did not forgive her.

No, I did not forgive her.

It was she who brought me the terrible letter that killed me a second time.

A variety troupe had come to the hospital and they were giving a very amusing show in the open air. I remember how I was roaring with laughter when Zina beckoned to me smiling and pointing at an envelope.

"You must dance first, sweetheart," she said, when I had pushed my way through the crowd to her, "and kiss me a hundred times on the cheek."

I did not want to dance or kiss her. I snatched the envelope and went back to watch the show. The clowns were doing an amusing act, and we were all splitting our sides with laughter. Still laughing I tore open the envelope, read the letter and collapsed on the spot. The director of Mother's factory regretted to inform me that Mother had been mortally wounded during the bombing of a troop train with presents for soldiers at the front, which she had been escorting.

I collapsed and do not remember what happened afterwards. I recovered consciousness at night, in a quiet ward where nothing had changed, everything was just the same. The wounded were snoring in their sleep, the window was creaking in the wind, and Julbars, the hospital pup, was barking hoarsely in the yard. For a moment I could not puzzle out what had happened and so I lay quietly there. But then I remembered and began to sob, burying my head in a pillow.

I wept for a long time and wore myself out, but felt no relief. For the first time I felt alone and realised there had never been and probably never would be anyone closer to me than Mother. She had understood me even when I thought she was being unfair.

I wept with my head buried in the pillow. Zina came and stood by the bed for a long time watching me sadly.

"Calm down, love. Don't cry," she said, stroking me with a soft hand. I wasn't angry with her any more. Her sympathy calmed me and I fell asleep, lulled by her warm hand and tender voice.

I awoke at early dawn. Zina was asleep in a chair, her legs drawn up beneath her. I got up, crept into the corridor and went outside into the quiet morning courtyard.

The night air was lifting and the birds were already stirring in the trees. There was a scent of early morning sun and the lake, which I had never seen, that was lapping somewhere beyond the hospital fence.

I climbed over the fence and into a meadow wet with dew. The meadow had been half mown and an empty cart with its shafts up stood by a high, fresh hay-stack. I walked past the cart and the hay-stack, then heard someone breathing behind me and turned round.

In the grass under a green cloud floating in the sky lay a horse, a delicate black foal. She raised her narrow head on its long, curving neck and looked at me with big violet eyes. The horse was not afraid of me. She lay on the morning earth, with a haze of rising dew shimmering over her coat as if it were grass.

I walked up with outstretched hand. She nuzzled my palm with her velvety warm lips and lay her head on the grass. I sat down beside her. I stroked her trusting neck, relaxing in my strange, new-found sense of peace, gentle-

ness, the sorrow and the joy of life, and buried my face in the foal's warm body. She did not drive me away, and was not afraid. She lay quietly, quivering occasionally, and when I grew calmer, she got up, shook off the dewy dampness and began to move across the meadow. Then she neighed softly and trotted away, her sleek coat shining in the sun, picking up high her slender, well-bred legs. And disappeared, melting into the morning air, while I lay watching her, reassured and happy in my grief.

"There is no death. A cloud turns into rain and rain into grass."

"But what about people, Mother?"

I was discharged from hospital in the winter. Zina cried, but I wasn't fooled by that. She always cried when someone was discharged, and I did not believe her tears. I might have kissed her goodbye, if we had been alone, but Travushkin trotted along behind us to the hospital gates, the persistent Travushkin who could not or would not see my dislike of him. So I did not kiss Zina or tell her that I had forgiven her long ago and did not bear her a grudge.

I shook her hand hastily and clumsily by the gates, almost stumbling into a snowdrift, nodded to Travushkin and set off down the snowy path to the station. I turned round once or twice. They were standing there, waving to me. Then I walked for a long while without looking back, and when I turned Zina had gone, but he was still there. Standing and waving to me.

I did nothing in return. All I needed to do was raise my hand, nothing else, just raise my hand.

Two days later my life had changed completely. Wintry, deserted Moscow was preparing to celebrate the New Year, 1944. The courtyard was piled high with snowdrifts, Pushkin Square was cold with the barrage balloon above it in the blue sky and the sad poet on a high pedestal at the beginning of Tverskoy Boulevard.

Pushkin Square, that used to be called Strastnaya Square. With the years I feel drawn more and more strongly to this corner of Moscow. Country people have their little log cabin and a garden with apple trees, and Beetle the dog in his kennel, and the fields and river—and all this remembers them and calls them back to its

primitive purity. The vast and tender land of childhood. People like me who grew up in the city have none of that. Yet the urge to go back where we belong, which is obviously felt by everyone, lies in us too, like an instinct, and with the years its vague summons grows more and more insistent.

No green meadow or gleaming river, no Beetle the dog in his kennel, but the empty, asphalted stone well of the courtyard, a nocturnal cat concert, the cooing of pigeons in the early morning, and the water hissing happily from the long heavy hose skilfully manipulated by Uncle Vasya, the yard-keeper—this is my land of childhood, my village of sentimental memories. This yard and Pushkin Square, which used to be called Strastnaya Square.

But the yard and the square have changed. Of the latter only the Izvestia building remains and the statue of Pushkin, now moved from Tverskoy Boulevard to the middle of the square.

There used to be an archway into our courtyard with heavy iron gates and a semi-circular iron post which smelt of dog's piss. First they blocked up the archway, even before the war, with boards, then with sheets of iron. So from the square you could not see the washing hanging in the yard, or the huge dustbin on the top of which Madam Agnes, a Persian cat with the most impeccable pedigree, who had taken to street-walking from a well-provided existence in our communal kitchen, would sit with her tail curled round her and shamelessly suffer the pangs of love. The gateway was blocked up because there was another archway with gates leading into the yard, and two would have been a luxury for one block. A little while later they removed the iron post, the last in Moscow, which had survived from the pre-revolutionary days of horse-drawn cabs. Horses used to be hitched to them.

The blocked-up archway divided the world in two. The dustbin was pushed under it, and on the spot where the dustbin had stood they planted a tree and put up a poster urging us to turn the yard into a verdant paradise. For a long time the tree refused to take root, but in the end it gave up and began to grow.

One day a photograph of our yard appeared in the

*Moscow Evening News.* It was a most exciting and happy event, a real treat for the tenants, as if it conferred fame on each person in the house. The newspaper was passed from hand to hand. Mother even kept a copy as a memento. I have still got it somewhere.

It was a remarkable photograph in which our yard, an airless stone enclosure with only one stunted little tree, looked like a blooming garden.

The photographer saw our yard transformed—both as it was now and as it would perhaps become one day with time. He had vision, he did not lie. What a fine art it is, finding a point of view! I climbed all over the yard for the best part of two days and finally found the spot from which the photographer had caught a glimpse of our yard in the future. You had to climb up to the twenty-eighth step of the fire escape and lean over in a very tricky way, then you could see the whole yard through the sparse foliage of the tree. At eye level there were spreading leaves (one branch close up, another further off, and in the background flowers on a balcony, lots of greenery and light). For a moment it really did seem as if you were in paradise.

The yard probably would have become what it looked like in the photo. But in the war an incendiary bomb burnt the tree down, and no one thought of planting another one.

When I was a child the stone walls of the former Strastnoy Convent, which had been turned into an anti-religious museum, stood on the square. On the front of the bell-tower was the famous motor-car advertisement for the Avtodor Society. The trams clanged their way through the narrow street between the convent walls and the Izvestia building. The Chat Noir cinema, soon renamed the Central, advertised the first sound movies with garish posters. At the beginning of Tverskoy Boulevard, almost next to Pushkin, was the tiny old Church of the Icon of Our Lady's Passion, where services were still held in spite of the proximity of the atheist museum. But in thirty-seven the church, the museum and all the former convent buildings were suddenly demolished. Renovated and extended on all sides the square lost its old name and began to be called Pushkin Square.

About this time there were also changes in Tverskoy

Boulevard, that had been famous for its book fairs where you could also buy balloons, kites, Chinese paper toys, rubber pipes that squeaked "go-away, go-away", sweets in gay wrappers, cockerel lollypops and other animals that you could suck all day and all sorts of strange and wonderful things that were nice and cheap: puzzles in boxes, playing cards, ribbons, magic wands. The tricks were sold by vendors and hawkers, and I used to buy lots of them and entertain the other people in our flat.

Tverskoy Boulevard was noisy, gay, and entertaining. Even gypsies used to come here. Real bands of gypsies, brightly dressed, with black hair and white teeth. They told fortunes, danced and had performing bears on chains. The bears used to amuse the crowds by doing all sorts of tricks—they could do somersaults, imitate drunks, fight with each other and their keeper, bow to the ecstatic audience, and collect generous remuneration for their art in a cap.

On revolutionary holidays tanks stood in our square on their way to the Red Square parade. I would wake up at dawn and run into the street which was already full of the celebrations. There were red flags, music from loudspeakers, banners on the buildings, pictures of the leaders, black tanks and Red Army men in full uniform—everything breathed excitement and the solemnity of the occasion.

Filling the air with smoke, exhaust and petrol fumes, the tanks would rumble and roar majestically down Gorky Street towards the Kremlin. The ground trembled as they moved. And their place was taken in our square by columns of demonstrators—gay, noisy crowds of happy people in a happy land.

They walked for one hour, two, three, even five, carrying portraits, posters, and banners, dancing and singing. What fun it was to join in and march with them, singing the stirring songs. It was good to be alive and to love the people whose portraits were carried.

But our square knew other days, sad times. Whenever a famous person lay in state in the Hall of Columns of the Trade Union House, thousands of people would come to pay their last respects. Sometimes the line of mourners stretched right up to our square.

The Pushkin Square that greeted me in 1944 was quiet,

sad, and anxious. The posters on the buildings urged people to make a final, supreme effort at home and at the front. The people were cold, tired and hungry. Trams and trolleybuses rumbled across the square. In the house management office they gave me the key to my room. It had been kept there together with lots of other keys awaiting the return of their owners from the war.

The room smelt stale and dusty, the stuffy smell of a strange place. I opened the window and was surprised how quiet the yard was. Everything looked the same as before the war, yet everything was different, unfamiliar and strange.

The smells and sounds were strange. The empty silence was strange. I did not realise at once that the yard was quite deserted—the pigeons that had cooed by the window had vanished as well as the cats who had caterwauled on the dustbin every evening. What a racket they had made, filling the yard with their wild screeching, or crying piteously like a baby abandoned by its mother in the cradle, so piteously that it almost broke your heart.

The cats and pigeons were no more. The pigeons had been caught and eaten, the cats ... had disappeared goodness only knows how.

Mother's dresses were hanging in the wardrobe. I recognised them all, but they smelt of mothballs and having lost Mother's warmth and odour seemed to betray her memory. Only the blue beret lying under a cushion on the sofa was faithful to her. It smelt of her hair, a living smell.

I picked it up and suddenly recalled a forgotten scene. I remembered coming back from school one winter before the war on a cold sunny day and suddenly seeing Mother. She was running, or rather skipping along Gorky Street by the Yeliseyevsky food shop kicking up her heels and sliding along the icy patches on the pavement, like a schoolgirl. But she was well over forty, and such childish behaviour was, to my mind, not to her credit. Her beret, the self-same beret, had slipped over one ear, revealing her greying hair. I was ashamed of her and waited for a moment letting her get ahead, so the passers-by would not know this was my mother...

This beret was the only thing that connected me with

the past, with my childhood. This beret and our decrepit neighbour Ivan Akimovich, for all the other neighbours were new and I had not got used to them yet. I was neither master in the flat nor the favourite of its inhabitants. I was a stranger. The former tenants had been either evacuated or killed in the war.

For a long time I could not get used to my strange room and the new strange neighbours, or to myself, now different from the person who had lived here before. Even that old constant feeling for the girl in my class, Varya, was different. I did not know whether I loved her as before or was only cherishing the memory of a past love, taking this memory to be true feeling in my spiritual loneliness.

Ivan Akimovich would sometimes creep into my room, coughing hard and long, his toothless, hungry mouth muttering something. He was not married and I knew that I should have to bury him when he died, for he had no one else. His hands and head shook, he was deaf and half-blind, half alive and half not, hardly aware whether he was in this world or the next. It was hard talking to him, and I kept quiet, contemplating and pitying him. Once this old man had been my ideological adversary, and I had never argued so furiously with anyone else.

We used to argue about something of which we were both totally ignorant. The most bitter disputes are often between people who don't know what they are talking about. We used to argue about God. Ivan Akimovich believed that God existed. He had even kept an icon in his room, hiding it behind a portrait of the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, which he had cut out of the *Ogonyok* magazine. Johann Sebastian Bach was somewhat out of place in this room, which looked like a carpenter's workshop, but he reminded Ivan Akimovich of an actor who had once taken pity on the village orphan boy and found him work with a theatre company touring Russian towns. It was in this theatre company that Ivan Akimovich learnt carpentry and learnt it well.

Two ignoramuses, an old man and a Young Pioneer, we often argued, accusing each other of being ignorant. "Only an ignorant person could believe in God" was the

truth that I knew and tried to drum into the old man, who stubbornly insisted that God existed, that He must exist because all things on earth and in heaven had been created by Him, the Lord.

How great is the power of ignorance! Knowledge begets doubt, and doubt fresh knowledge and fresh doubts. Knowledge disturbs the mind, making us suffer in the search for the elusive truth. Ignorance is strong because it has no doubts. It knows nothing and believes that it knows all. In knowledge lies conviction. In ignorance—stubbornness. The ignorant man is fortunate in thinking himself free, not suspecting his slavery. For him slavery is the concept of freedom. He may even die for this idea of freedom.

The old man and I were not so far apart, although he was more magnanimous. He did not seek to destroy anything in me, to convert me to his ignorance. He only shielded his face from my blows. Ivan Akimovich had the experience of a life-time behind him, years of enjoying the sweetness of ignorance. I did not even have that. Mine was a howl of rejection, the confident shriek of the savage. So my faith was, of course, more blind than that of the old man whom I denounced. How right is the Oriental saying: "An ignorant man is an enemy unto himself, how can he be any man's friend?"

Now Johann Sebastian Bach, the German composer, had been banished by Ivan Akimovich. The icon had come out of hiding and hung bravely in the appointed corner. St Nicholas the Wonderworker gazed at me sadly and reproachfully.

Naive, good old man, I am no longer the young challenger in the red Young Pioneer tie. I have returned from the next world and know that we are all equal before the Most High.

Moscow was preparing to celebrate the New Year, and although it was war-time and soldiers were dying at the front, making their wives widows and their children orphans, the life force asserted itself indestructibly, and the very air seemed to be full of a sense of festivity, an expectation of joyous change.

The shops had managed to stock up with rationed food. At the disabled servicemen's canteen in Stoleshnikov Street where I got my meals a one-armed artist was

decorating the walls and window panes: the dark semi-basement room was transformed into a fairy tower. I took the tram to Izmailovsky Park and cut a fir branch.

It filled the room with the fragrance of childhood. My sorrow was not lightened by this decorated fir branch. I seemed to have forgotten the taste of joy. My sadness was selfish. I was used to the idea that Mother was no more, and that my life would follow its set path without her. Now I was not grieving for her, but feeling sorry for myself without her. There was no one to understand me, to show me affection, no one with whom to share my pain and sorrow. There was only one another person as dear to me as Mother—Varya. But I could not seek consolation from her. I meant nothing to her, she had no need of me.

New Year approached, my twenty-first. Since then I have celebrated a fair number, both happy and sad, and neither. In boisterous company, alone, travelling, or at home. Many times I have been Father Frost with a false beard and a sack stuffed with presents for the children. But I have forgotten all these New Year celebrations, except for my first fir tree.

It had grown mysteriously overnight in the corner by the window. I was amazed when I woke next morning, and lay for a long time without moving, staring at the green miracle, afraid that I was dreaming. But it was no dream. It was a real fir tree hung with brightly coloured toys, tinsel and sweets, alive and breathing by the window. Mother said Father Frost had brought it in the night.

It was a living being, not a tree, and all the time it stood in our room I felt its presence within me. The tree transformed and ennobled me. I seemed to become a good, obedient child, Mummy's little boy, under the spell of this live magic. The room smelt of it. Not only the room, but the passage and the kitchen. The whole flat was redolent with the fragrance of the forest.

But one morning I woke up and suddenly, still half-asleep and without opening my eyes, sensed the empty space in the room and felt afraid. I sensed physically that the room had grown bigger, infinitely bigger, like a vessel with the air pumped out. I felt that something terrible had happened and did not want to open my

eyes, as if I knew that I would be unhappy when I did. I wanted to go back to sleep, to the past, but the empty space oppressed me, and I realised that the tree had gone. It had vanished overnight, just as it had appeared.

"Father Frost took it away," Mother said.

This was not true. For a moment I believed Mother and was reassured, but later when I went out to play I suddenly saw it, my beautiful fir tree. It was my tree, only stripped of the decorations. Bare and piteous, like Agnes, the old moulting cat who lived on the dustbin. Uncle Vasya, the yard-keeper, was dragging it out of the yard by the crown, as if it were a tail, to the bonfire in the middle of Strastnaya Square, where other trees from other yards were burning noisily. He tossed it on top, it snapped and yelped, then a column of smoke, growing bigger and bigger, wreathed into the pale sky—life was departing.

The bonfire flared up, the flames licked avidly, cruelly the greedy, merciless flames, and my beautiful tree writhed and groaned in them.

I suddenly realised that Mother had been lying, that there was no magic and no Father Frost, just a lot of make-believe. What happened to me in that instant, I do not know. My pity vanished, and I watched the execution of the tree avidly.

Now the bonfire in the middle of Strastnaya Square by the convent walls excited me. The flames burnt solemnly and brightly. The sparks flew high. Other boys ran up. We sped round the nearby courtyards and entrances, collecting our toppled idols and dragging them to be executed with excited shouts.

But when I came home in the evening and saw the empty corner and the loneliness of the deceived space still unfilled, I crept to my bed on tiptoe, averting my eyes, and lay down.

The emptiness was in me, not in the room. I felt ashamed. But ashamed of what? Wasn't it a sign of growing up that I realised the adults had been lying, and exploded their fairy-tale hoax? Or had I betrayed something? And if so, what?

Everything repeats itself, as if people never learnt any lessons. Later I myself often dressed up as Father Frost, trying to make sure that the children would not recognise me, that they would believe the winter fairy-tale. Fairy-

tales are not forever, they are bound to be exposed, wounding our childish trust and being called a lie. Yet depriving us of fairy-tales is probably wrong too: the process of seeing through them is painful, but it is the process of acquiring knowledge.

I shall never forget my first fir tree. I can never forget how I worshipped it, only to punish it later on the bonfire in happy revenge, when I discovered that it was no miracle, but an ordinary tree. Perhaps this is the sad, inevitable fate of all cast-down idols—the bonfire and oblivion. Oblivion to everything, even joy. So we should not have idols then? But life is impossible without them...

The New Year, 1944, was approaching. Two days before Ivan Akimovich fell ill. He was visited by a young lady doctor, who had obviously just graduated from medical institute and was not used to patients' sufferings. She said that he not only had a weak heart, but was also suffering from malnutrition, and needed some meat broth. She herself asked the question:

"But where can you get meat?"

You could get meat in exchange for clothes in the countryside, but you needed a special pass or a business travel permit to get there. I possessed neither. Among Mother's papers I found an official form from her factory and decided, on reflection, that if necessary it could be turned into a permit. The typist in the house management office typed on it that I was travelling to Kashira District on factory business, I added a flourish to represent the factory director's signature, and prepared to set off with this forged document.

I packed Mother's dresses in my kitbag. I felt no regret. They had done their job and smelling of mothballs, they did not arouse any emotions in me except the desire to get rid of these things that no longer belonged here.

The suburban train took its time. It was friendly and relaxed inside, like a dug-out in a quiet spell, because the passengers were mainly demobbed soldiers or wounded who had not yet completely recovered. There was that special army spirit, which everyone who had served at the front knows and which is like home from home. The smell of cheap tobacco, weather-beaten army coats, and boots mingled together here and seemed to inject fresh blood into my veins, as if returning me again, for a moment, to the brotherhood of my fellow soldiers.

Once more I felt that there, at the frontline, amid the firing, the fear and the death, there is a special kind of attraction. Everything, the taste of cold vodka, that precious hundred grammes, the flavour of frozen bread that melted in your mouth, the smell of puttees drying by the fire, the guffawing at smutty jokes, the sadness of precious letters, and the universal admiring of photos of wives and girl-friends, everything that is called army life and is unforgettable, unique, that binds forever people of all kinds on the threshold of death.

A soldier's heart beat in my breast. I was in my element again. Damn the war, but bless the purity and fairness of the fighting man's brotherhood. We had not yet heard of the word "compatibility", but on the spaceship of history, we, its little particles, flew into immortality, protecting each other.

Blessed be those first lessons in comradeship that taught one to give and not to take, to protect others and not oneself. A city boy who had been taught by my mother to eat properly over my plate, I would lean forward to the communal pot, for which I got many a rap on the forehead. My forehead was covered with bruises, before I learnt that it was good manners not to stretch out to the pot, spilling the soup, but to draw your spoon towards yourself, putting a piece of bread under it or the palm of your other hand. That is the only proper, clean and hygienic way, because it is good and convenient for the others.

And what about sleeping in a trench on the cold earth? At first I slept wrapped in my greatcoat, warming myself with my breathing, but one day someone put his greatcoat over me and snuggled up to me, teaching me that it is warmer if you give your warmth to someone else. Yes, the years will pass before the laws of peace-time force you to bend over your own plate, because putting your hand or a piece of bread under a spoonful of soup is not hygeinic, or well-mannered.

Sometimes your hand suddenly freezes over the plate, your head starts aching, and your face flushes with shame. What did I do wrong today? What sleeping companion's coat did I tug off and spread over myself?

Peace-time has its own laws, its own harshness, and brand of courage. Is this not why the officer who was brave in battle flinches before injustice, and the man who

was a coward at the front rushes to protect the weak?

Then, on the eve of 1944, the spirit of soldiery was not yet extinguished. Life on the home front was alien and difficult for me.

I got off at a little halt, then stood and watched the black engine and green carriages fade and melt into the white distance, taking with them my soldier's sensations and feelings. Then I again became a person on the home front with home-front worries and fears, and set off down the snowy path into the dark forest, snapping with cold, beyond which there was bound to be a village.

The black engine had carried away my soldierly feelings. Now I was a petty barterer with a sack and the appropriate thoughts and calculations. Being determines consciousness, of course, but can it do so that quickly? I walked along, pleased to have got here so easily on my forged document and trying to work out how much meat I should ask for Mother's cardigan and how much flour for her woolen dress.

I went through one village, then another, knocking at lots of doors, and bargaining as toughly as a real barterer. The villagers did not welcome me with open arms. They were used to people like me. And they had nothing to offer in exchange. They'd eaten all their stores up long ago.

So I did not get a kilogram of beef for Mother's cardigan, as I had reckoned. A tired old woman with gnarled fingers stroked my great coat, chanting sadly "my darlin' soldier boy" and brought me a piece of meat wrapped in dirty muslin, barely a pound. I relented and handed her the cardigan. Let it warm her old bones. But altogether I got about two kilograms of meat, some flour, and a little butter.

It was growing dark when I set off back, but I was only half-way through the first village when a jeep sped out of the snowy darkness and drew up beside me. A militiaman climbed out in leisurely fashion and asked:

"Are you the one who went round the houses?"

Before I could reply, a voice cried, "They've caught the black marketeer, lads", and a moment later we were surrounded by village boys, and the street was ringing with the sound of "caught the black marketeer".

"Get in," the police officer said, opening the jeep door.

We set off for an unknown destination. I held my sack in my lap and yawned. For some reason I kept yawning. I did not feel sleepy, but I could not stop yawning, and eventual-

ly I realised that it was due to nerves because I felt helpless and afraid.

I had the same feeling many years later in the most unexpected way, that nervous yawning from apprehension and innocent guilt. My son Nikita was not a model pupil at school. His workbook was full of angry remarks such as "talks in class!", "played truant", "sent out for changing places". In fact, you might have thought from this that he was the most terrible rule breaker, the world's worst layabout.

He grew up like all boys. No, he was not coddled. He was always active and quick, full of a kind of bubbling energy that set him in motion, sometimes without a definite aim, alas. But he was upright, honest, and never lied. We taught him always to tell the truth, to say what he thought.

Who knows, perhaps many of his misunderstandings at school were because of this—his uncompromising honesty. In the fourth or fifth form the maths teacher wrote in his workbook: "Ps. (which was supposed to be parents) come to see me. Son don't hehave in lessons."

Nikita said he would not show us this note, because it should be "doesn't", not "don't".

"Don't be so clever," said the teacher. She did not correct the note and never forgave Nikita.

I was often called to the school. Nikita had not been paying attention in class again, he had been talking and had got another low mark, which by the end of term somehow managed to turn into a more acceptable higher one.

God, how tired I got of those conversations. At first I tried to argue, object, stick up for my son, but then I realised this only set the teachers more against Nikita. Anna Ivanovna, the head, reproved me in a strict voice, shaking her finger at me. I stood before her, stifling the familiar yawn, and she lectured me as if it was I, not my son, who had not done the homework and who talked in class. Her face even showed a certain distaste—as if I were a completely hopeless case. I could have objected, could have assured her that my son and I were not lost souls, that we had our merits, but it was pointless. She was as categorical and unbending as our regimental sergeant-major, so I kept quiet, restraining my flashes of pride.

Why did I keep silent? Why did I give up objecting, as if I agreed that my son was no good? Probably because I

was afraid—afraid of this fragile little woman who had so peremptorily condemned me and my son, pronouncing a sentence against which there was no right of appeal.

If my son and I had been blameless, I need not have feared the small teacher's wrath. But we were not blameless. He really did talk in class and make a noise in the break, and I really had failed to teach him to study properly. I was afraid to argue with the head mistress, to accuse her of disrespect to me and my son, who was not only an abstract quantity called a "pupil" but also a person. To argue with teachers was to incense them even more. Incensed, they could be vindictive and cruel. I was afraid that this vindictiveness might descend on my son's head. And therefore could not stifle my guilty, humiliating yawn.

Dear children, how often I have swallowed my pride for you. No, something bigger than pride...

The police officer, the master of my fate, sat next to me in the jeep and said nothing. He was even dozing, I thought. The driver said nothing either, staring gloomily at the darkening road. Who had told them about me? Who had given me away? I tried to remember everyone I had visited that day. Any of them could have done it, but I did not want to suspect them of it. It's humiliating to think that people you smiled at and trusted were rotten.

I was not guilty of any crime, yet I was a criminal. This sense of my own criminality, guilt, was devastating. No one had accused me of anything yet, but I had accused myself, shivering either with the cold or with shame. I did not feel guilty towards the people who were driving me goodness-knows where, but to my mother's memory. Was I guilty? Yes, I was. The forged permit was in my pocket.

When I wrote it, I had no qualms and never considered that I was doing something wrong. Until now I had not thought of myself as a criminal, although I had been one ever since I found the factory form in Mother's papers. Could it be that he, the militiaman, was my conscience? That it was external censure, not inner pain? I had never thought before that a lie not called a lie can be taken for the truth until someone shouts "not true!" So the story about the emperor's new clothes is a wise fable about the human conscience, is it not? I could have justified myself by saying that I had been prompted by good, not evil, but I did not, because fraud is fraud, whatever the motives behind it. When

the jeep stopped in front of a quiet building in a quiet town, I no longer feared the punishment to come, because I had already condemned myself.

But later, after they had taken a statement and confiscated my sack, when the militiaman locked me in the cold room with bars at the windows, which they called a cell here, and when I lay down on the hard bench, drawing my knees up, covering my head with my greatcoat and warming myself with my breath, I thought: "What have I actually done wrong and why am I punishing myself?" Had I not ignored a temporary restriction on entering a certain area for the sake of human justice? I had entered it because I wanted to save a human life.

I had done nothing wrong.

They kept me in the cell for twenty-four hours. Eventually the tired officer summoned me, stiff and hungry, and handed me back my papers and sack, saying:

"Take your forgery, barterer. Thank the factory director."

Without really understanding what had happened, I grabbed my sack and ran out. The sense of freedom was overwhelming, like recovering from a serious illness.

I saw the New Year in at the station, waiting for a train. I stood on the platform, gazing at the pale moon and the blue snow enveloping the quiet town, then went to the waiting-room and lay down to sleep on the long bench.

So this was how the new year began for me, my first year at home. Not a bad beginning, because my visit to the village had not been in vain. Fortified by the meat broth Ivan Akimovich did begin to get better. I looked after him patiently. In my time I have cured countless patients, but Ivan Akimovich is probably the one I remember best. I tended him, got him back on his feet, and he lived for many another year. The nutritious, warm, pre-war smell of boiled meat lingered in our flat for many days, wafting into the nooks and crannies of the long corridor. Ivan Akimovich supped the broth, and all the neighbours had a taste of the meat. It was a real celebration that lasted almost the whole of New Year week.

Time passed and I organised my life, but in my thoughts I was always with Varya. I did not try to see her, as if I could hear a warning: "No, don't go, live alone. No, she's not waiting for you, she probably doesn't even remember you."

I fought the temptation for a long time, but could not resist it, and eventually set off to see her.

What would have happened if I had obeyed that inner warning and left Varya to live her own life? Would she have been happier in that other life, without me, or would our paths have crossed in any case?

Bronnaya Street where Varya lived still held the sound of her voice, her footsteps, and her fragrance. The street had forgotten nothing, carefully preserving everything in its old place—the phone box, the newspaper kiosk, and the tall poplar on which I carved the precious name as a love-sick schoolboy. Even the iron litter bin was in the same, highly inconvenient spot, next to the entrance to the greengrocery, and the door still banged against it as before. It was as if the upheavals of war had not existed and time had stood still here.

Everything was the same as before. And just as before I dialled her number in the phone booth and waited for a reply. I heard her voice.

She recognised me at once. Straightaway. Afterwards I often recalled this moment, flattering myself that she had recognised me instantly because she had been waiting for me all the time. Well, if not waiting, at least she had not forgotten me, and if she had not forgotten me, I must mean something to her.

This sensation, which contains a faint hope, still lives within me, although I now know that her feeling for me then was far too fragile to join our two destinies for life. But we joined them nevertheless. So this was the happy ending to my first unhappy childhood love.

"Where are you? Where are you phoning from?" she asked.

"Here, in the booth," I said.

"Put the receiver down and come up. Quickly."

"I'm afraid," I laughed. "Really I am."

"Don't be afraid. I won't eat you," she replied and hung up.

I went up to the second floor where she lived. She was already waiting on the landing by the door.

" I love you, Varya," I said, going up to her. "I can't live without you."

She did not reply, but I now know that was the moment when she thought I must be her fate. And should you try to resist your destiny?

We said practically nothing. We sat in her room drinking tea, and in those minutes I knew for sure what happiness is. The green of the flowers by the windows and the flaxen white of Varya's hair, the plait which she still wore lying on her tight, small bosom, the confusion in her eyes, her soft, gentle voice—all this enveloped me, made me weak and hopeful. I was happy in those minutes and did not even think of another, greater reward.

Yet there was one.

When I was leaving an hour or two later, Varya said goodbye to me on the landing and blushingly kissed me on the cheek. For us, pre-war boys and girls, a kiss meant almost everything—a declaration of love, a vow of eternal fidelity.

I had won the long battle. I had conquered. Conquered not only Varya, but also my old rival. That other boy from the other school, who had the same name as me. That Kostya, whose surname was Vassiliev, had become a pilot. He had also remembered Varya all these years and written her letters, counting on her love. But I had beaten him to it, and Varya wrote to him apologising and saying that he should not go on hoping because she was getting married.

So we got married and lived together in harmony, hoping the future would bring us joy and happiness. If only the war would hurry up and finish.

In the mornings she would hurry off to the institute and I to a factory to pack mine detonators. I had no profession. There hadn't been time to learn a useful trade. I knew how to dig a trench, make a dug-out and camouflage it, or crawl on my belly through the enemy lines and capture a prisoner to get information from him. But this knowledge was useless at home. It wouldn't earn you bread, vodka or money here. I could not endure the tension of the monotonous operations and realised after two or three months that I could not overcome my shell-shock from the front. I was given a different job at the factory, that of time-keeper, which was not hard, but rather humiliating for a former soldier, because it was meant for the disabled. However, I did it for a few months, then screwed up my courage and passed the entrance examinations at a medical institute to study to be a doctor, like the Caucasian gypsy had predicted. I often bless that young woman who predicted my profession. I cannot imagine a different life, and now it seems to me that I always dreamed of being a doctor even as a child. Although

I know this is not so, I do remember that people in white coats always produced a magical impression on me. They had soft, light hands whose touch could cure. I was hardly ever ill as a child, which is probably why I remember the healing caress of those doctors' hands. I also remember the smell of the chemist shop which I passed every day on the way to school. I liked that smell, it seemed to cheer me up.

Who knows, perhaps the beginnings of what became my life's work, my vocation, are rooted in the faint, almost unconscious impressions of childhood?

Varya is sometimes worried that our son has no definite aim in life. He is interested in lots of things, but nothing in particular. This is probably quite normal at sixteen, but what mother does not want to hear the call of a life's vocation in her child as early as possible? Perhaps we are too hasty in our parental impatience: perhaps this call is still inaudible even to Nikita himself, concealed in some vague trifles, and will not show itself until much later.

But are our professional inclinations really programmed from birth and does a person only have to wait until he hears the mysterious summons? You might wait all your life. Of course, every job has its attraction, and every job can captivate a person for life. For example, Varya could not conceive of life without her job. She works in the foreign books section of the Academy of Sciences library. She was sent here almost thirteen years ago when she graduated from the institute. She even wept because she did not want to go, but after a year or two she enjoyed her work which had seemed boring and uninteresting at first.

Varya, my darling! What a dull life we are leading! We have become inseparable after living together for so many years, but are we happy?

How long did we live together as one, one in flesh and one in spirit? How long did we experience what people call happiness? Only a very short time. Six months, perhaps a year. Then the other Kostya's sister came to see us, a thin girl with black reproachful eyes, bringing the news that her brother, my rival, had been killed in combat.

When she heard this Varya seemed to draw away from me. Not for a grief-stricken moment, a day or two, but for life. As if everything inside her had shrivelled up at the thought that he had died because of her, that she was to blame for his death.

I do not know to this day whether she loved him. Perhaps she didn't. Perhaps if I had died in the lorry on the way to the medical unit, she would have experienced the same feeling of irreparable guilt. Then, dead, I should have conquered my rival once and for all, just as he, the vanquished one, had conquered me by his death.

Even if she had loved him, love passes. But she blamed herself for his death, and a sense of guilt is akin to conscience and stronger than love. It is indestructible.

The eternal memory. Is it a blessing or a curse? She will remember all her life. All her life she will feel guilty, rightly or wrongly, it makes no difference. For her the guilt is real. She feels guilty to him, the dead one, but is there not a different guilt in this eternal memory, guilt to the living? To me, our children, our son and daughter?

My illusory happiness ended. I would wake from my dreams at early dawn and lie quietly, afraid of waking Varya and reassuring myself with the calmness of her gentle, fine face. Her face looked different in sleep. In daytime her bashful shyness and tendency to blush at the slightest trifle gave her face a rather unique expression. When she blushed, her eyes watered, her long eyelashes fluttered, and Varya would cover them with the palm of her hand. I preferred her quiet, night-time face. The day-time one no longer belonged to me. In its soft, tender features I could detect a dry aloofness, almost coldness. But in sleep she did not drag away from me. On the contrary, she would nuzzle my shoulder as if seeking my protection and affection.

We were expecting a child. Varya's old, pre-marriage dresses were tight round her stomach. It was big and round, and embarrassed me. When she and I were walking in the street, I caught myself trying to walk a little apart from her, as if she had nothing to do with me, she just happened to be walking along the street like I was.

But at home in the morning when Varya was just beginning to stir, but had not woken up properly, when she was on the verge of wakefulness, still dreaming sweetly, I would kiss her stomach carefully, put my ear to it and listen to the life growing inside. A moment later Varya would wake up frowning and pull her nightdress over her, avoiding my caress.

We had a girl, Olga. Now Olga Konstantinovna is an educated young lady with the looks of a blonde film star,

who is immersed in the study of solid state physics.

I love her, more and more as the years go by, probably because I appreciate her obedient nature increasingly. She has never caused us any of the worry that Nikita brings us every day.

She was easy to bring up, no problems or special worries. A post-war child who never had too much of anything, she was undemanding, unpretentious and obedient. She worked hard at school, bringing home the praise of the teachers, took on extra-curricular duties most conscientiously, and gradually grew up, becoming prettier each year. She knew she was attractive, and was fond of standing in front of the mirror, combing her hair in different ways, but always went to school with her hair combed sensibly back off her face, a quiet, well-behaved schoolgirl, who knew how to behave anywhere. Well brought up, although we put far less effort into her upbringing than Nikita's. There was nothing challenging about Olga, she was all sweetness and gentleness. Teachers adore little girls like that, nice, quiet and hard-working, even if they are not particularly clever. And they adored Olga. For in addition she was a bright child who learnt everything quickly.

She had no trouble in graduating and getting her candidate's degree, after which she married quickly and had a daughter, whom she wanted to leave with us, but we had Nikita and he was such a handful that we could not take our granddaughter. Olga was not in the least put out and got her into some special kindergarten where children were handed over like left luggage for as long as the parents liked, even the whole week. Olga knew how to get things done.

Her husband is Volodya. He is thirty-two, but everyone still uses his first name only. He is simply Volodya, a bearded young man fond of noisy get-togethers, who plays the guitar, jokes and argues. About eight years ago he graduated from automobile and road construction institute, but where he works and what he does is a complete mystery, even, I suspect, to his wife Olga. But he probably does something useful and seems to be successful at whatever it is, judging by the medal he was awarded recently.

I like him, although he is obviously not so happy about me. He is too distant from me, from the main thing in my life, the memory of the war, that unhealed wound of my generation.

How can I forget the war? I want to, but I cannot. How bitter I felt recently at the dinner given by Olga in the Aragvi restaurant to celebrate getting her candidate's degree.

There were lots of guests there, her friends, academic opponents and doctors of science. There was even an Academician, the youngest of the guests, an amusing, ginger-haired boy in a shabby jacket.

I was enjoying myself. I sat down next to a bearded fellow, slightly older than the rest, and began to enquire whether he had been in the war and, if so, on what front. He had been on the Third Ukrainian, and did not want to talk about it. But I did. I began telling him about my first battle. He listened politely for a while and then interrupted apologetically:

"Not now, old man. It's not the right time or place," and went off.

Then I went and sat with some pretty girls in full skirts, elegantly smoking long cigarettes, but did not find an audience here either. I could not calm down. The memories were surging up in me, I was brimming over with them. I thought the magic word "war" should bring us together, different people of different ages, but it did not. So I went back to Varya, intending to pour out my heart to her.

"Don't," she said. "Let's just sit quietly."

Quietly? It was hardly quiet. The guests were as rowdy as a crowd in the marketplace, the tape recorder was churning out the latest hit by some American pop group, and in the middle of the room Olga's young friends swayed and jerked to it, the red-headed Academician wriggling his hips and kicking his feet like a young savage in the jungles of Latin America.

I sat down in the far corner of the banqueting room, with a bitter sense of my solitude at this youthful celebration. I envied them, the young, envied the beauty, ease and elegance of their ugly inelegant dances, the drone of their pop music, their gay clothes—envied them everything I could not have.

Perhaps I am no longer marching in line with them, but somewhere at the side. Perhaps I only think I am in step with them, whereas in fact I have been marking time on the spot for a long while?

It is loneliness, of course, that drives me along this un-

known path in search of Victor Travushkin. Otherwise why would I need him, that forgotten person whom I once carelessly passed by, not understanding him. Then I had nothing in common with him, but now we have everything in common—our past, our life. I am travelling in search of myself, to see Victor Travushkin, to hang on to the life that is now slipping away. Shall I find him?

Once I was very fond of travelling by train, in childhood and early youth, but with time it began to tire me, and if I had to go anywhere I tried to fly there quickly. I used to like train journeys precisely because they are long, the gradual change of landscape through the window, the walks on the platform, the crowds at station bazaars, the steamy smell of hot potato and the taste of fried chicken. But for some time now travelling by train even if it does not tire me, no longer holds the same thrill of novelty for me—it is too familiar and dreary, I have hundreds of things on my mind, and my former curiosity and sense of discovery have been replaced by weary contemplation.

After we got married, Varya and I set up house together. Her mother, Praskovia Makarovna, used to visit us once a week and do everything the way she wanted it. She even rearranged the furniture. She did not regard us as proper grown-up people.

Varya's father died long before the war. Her mother brought her up on her own and now, although she did not actually reproach her, she seemed to want Varya's constant gratitude. She was getting on for fifty and had lived most of her life in the town, but that period seemed to have not affected her, while her village childhood and youth remained forever. Although Varya had graduated from the Foreign Languages Institute and knew English, her mother insisted on comparing her unfavorably with other girls simply because everything they did was always better. To the end of her days, and she died quite recently at the age of eighty three, she thought us spineless, incompetent creatures, to whom she would not "kowtow" for anything in the world.

Our family budget was tight, and on Sundays I put on my greatcoat and went off to sell cigarettes at the Palashevsky Market. As a disabled serviceman I was entitled to a cigarette ration, but I did not smoke. It was only later at thirty that I began smoking for some reason, but at that time I did not and sold my cigarettes for a rouble each.

In the market throng, among soldiers who had been through the mill of war, like myself, amid cripples, happy and sad, who had found or lost their vocation, and were selling food and other things—clothing, books, footwear, American corned beef, potatoes, sauercraut, watches, sewing machines and gramophone needles, I felt relaxed and at ease. For, in spite of the initial peace and pleasure of married life, I was bored with the inaction, the monotony of civilian life. I used to dream of the front. Not the fear of battle, the mud in the trenches, the fleas which even the heat of an open fire could not burn out, or the terror of a flying shell—I did not dream of this. That seemed to be forgotten and now somehow secondary. I dreamed of the cosiness, the warmth and smell of the dug-out, the soldiers' home, just as a short time ago, there, in the dug-out, I had dreamt of Moscow. It wasn't that I longed to get back to the front. No, I had been through enough already. I wanted to live, particularly now that I had Varya beside me with my child growing in her stomach. But I could not get used to this new way of life.

There, at the front, I was fed and clothed. I had no other responsibility than keeping my rifle clean and oiled and going unthinkingly where I was ordered. At the front everything, even the thinking, was done for me. I just had to obey orders or die, without flinching. It was a hard and yet an easy life. But here, at home, I had to think, make decisions and worry about earning a living. I was surrounded by hundreds of things for which I was responsible. Possibly my nostalgia for the dug-out resulted from an unconscious fear of independent thought and action in this new, peacetime existence.

The years passed, speeding by, happy and sad, good and bad. Life followed its course.

One afternoon Olga phoned me at work and asked in a flat voice:

"Can you come round, Father?

"Is tomorrow evening alright?

"No, today, at once if possible."

" At once?"

„Yes."

What's the matter?" I asked.

Nothing. Mother's here. See you soon ," she hung up.

Her voice had been deliberately calm and impassive. She had wanted to reassure me, but I realised something serious had happened.

An hour later I arrived at her two-room flat in a nine-storey block in Sushchevskaya Street. Olga opened the door and said:

"Mother's in the kitchen."

Perhaps nothing had happened after all. They were having tea and cake. There was even a bottle of wine on the table, unopened though.

"Having a nice cup of tea?" I asked, kissing Varya.

Varya accepted my kiss, but her expression was strange and unfamiliar. A kind of tense, feverish, suppressed anxiety.

Olga shook her head sadly and left the room.

"What's the matter, Varya?" I wanted to stroke the hand resting on the table, but Varya drew away, gently, quietly, so as not to upset me.

"I don't know," she said. She walked up to the window and said nothing for a long while, standing with her back to me and looking outside. "I feel terrible, my head's killing me... I can't forget anything. I don't know how to forget everything. Please forgive me, I am so tired of thinking and remembering. The time has come to pay. We have to pay for everything sooner or later..."

"For what, Varya?"

"Oh, my God," she whispered, "For betraying..."

And she began to weep.

It was many years since she had mentioned or uttered the name of the other Kostya who died in the war long ago, and I thought that even if she had not forgotten him, she had at least resigned herself to that old loss... So she had not resigned herself and he had always been with us, a threesome.

I had never thought anything like that could happen, never noticed that she was ill. Unless one could call her constant preoccupation with a single idea an illness and not a character trait. So I had known everything, yet nothing about my wife. Outwardly she had lived with me, finished her studies, got to job, done the washing, fed me and the children, but inwardly she had been waiting tensely for something.

With the years this preoccupation seemed to have taken her further and further away from me. We were both unhappy, and now I knew why. I because I loved her, and she because she did not love me. Had God rewarded or punished us? With the same blessing or curse. He had given us a single love, a single constancy for our whole long life.

My and Varya's feelings were seeking reciprocity in different worlds and not finding it through no fault of our own. The third person who could probably have reassured her, joined the broken chain, had perished in the war. I would have called him myself to restore Varya's peace of mind, but he was too far away to summon back.

I took Varya to the hospital. She spent a long time there. She got rid of her feelings of guilt and fear, but the doctors did not discharge her. I visited her almost every day. It was summer and warm. The patients on the mend walked in a circle one behind the other, in pairs or singly, in the hospital garden, all apparently healthy women like the ones you see outside in the street, behind the high wall of the hospital grounds.

I brought Varya food from home. She ate it and told me about her neighbours in the ward, distressed of their suffering. But more often we just sat on a bench, I holding her hand, and said nothing.

I would carefully stroke the delicate hand, already touched by time with a few wrinkles in the furrows, play with the long, slim fingers and ask her an occasional question, no matter what, just to hear her answer, to hear her voice, and I was happy. In these moments we both seemed to feel peace and delight at our closeness, as if we had found each other again.

Past us filed the patients, alone, with relatives, smiling, sad, all different and all preoccupied with their own thoughts or scrutinising Varya and me. The leaves rustled in the tall poplar, the warm sun shone, and the pigeons, grown fat from hospital titbits, nestled in the long, cool grass. Life went on its way around us, and we sat there, watching it, hand in hand, deep in silence, and were happy. Varya and I had not been so close for a long time. It was as if we were beginning life again.

But can life begin again? "As if"... how faint and deceptive is the hope behind these words. But hope was still

alive within me: Varya did not let go of my hand. She leaned towards me, as if seeking protection.

They took away Varya's guilt and memory of the past in the hospital and seemed to remove her core. She was the same, only different. She came home calm, affectionate and strange, not our old Varya. She lacked the old constant anxiety. I loved this Varya, but obviously loved the other one, whom I had known for many years, more. I pitied this Varya. She was helpless, like a stricken bird that wants to fly but cannot. To an outsider Varya might have appeared quite healthy, but I could sense her throbbing memory of the past, the feeling that had been called an illness and driven out of her. For how long had it been driven out?

The train sped along, carriages swaying and wheels drumming. With me in the compartment was a tired man who slept almost without waking on the top bunk. When he did wake up, he would look out of the window, utter a faint "well, I never" and hastily climb down, run out of the compartment for a minute or two, then fall asleep again almost before his head touched the pillow.

An old woman in the same compartment was also trying to get to sleep, but unsuccessfully. She attempted to strike up a conversation with me. But I did not feel like talking. I had a pain in my chest that would not go away. Her granddaughter was holding a black toy dog, combing its long hair and calling it Barky. When she had finished, she put it on her grandmother's knee, saying:

"Look after her, Barky!" and ran out of the compartment.

Barky sat patiently, guarding grandmother and the rest of us from strangers. The shaggy toy looked remarkably like the little puppy that appeared unexpectedly in our flat one day.

Coming home one day I had noticed a new smell in the flat, sniffed and asked what it was, but neither my wife nor Nikita replied, merely exchanging secretive, conspiratorial glances. Suddenly something round and black, about the size of my glove, shot out of a room into the hall straight under my feet, barking weakly, squatted down, wetted my shoes, and made off for the kitchen.

He was an amusing, high-spirited little chap. We all felt a great affection for him. Nikita would kiss his shaggy

head, cook him special food, read books on dog-care and try to train him. His dearest wish to have a dog, which had not received any parental support, had been granted. Someone had abandoned the pup in the entrance.

For a few days the pup had no name, while Nikita was thinking of one. He finally announced that the new member of the family would be called by the English name of Blackie. But since Nikita pronounced the "l" almost like a "v" it was too much for the neighbours, friends and schoolmates, and the pup ended up with the double rather ugly-sounding name of Blackie-Bveckie. Some people just called him Becky. The pup was big-hearted and did not mind. It readily responed to any name.

He was trusting and affectionate with everyone, liked people, and greeted everyone by nuzzling their hands.

"No, boy," Nikita would instruct him. "You must frighten people. Come on, bark! Go for him!"

But the pup did not know what his master wanted and continued to make advances to any passer-by who stopped to stroke him. Blackie's life began with the science of hating, but he never mastered it. He possessed different instincts—trust for all living creatures. He would not even attack dog's eternal enemy—cats, but respectfully trotted round them, wagging his tail ingratiatingly. No, he did not learn how to hate people. He learnt how to fear, but even that was later on, when he was older.

He was attractive, touching and funny. He would trot along the street, a black, fluffy ball, darting in and out of Nikita's feet. He did not know he was attractive and did not sense it, but Nikita knew and the universal admiration of the pup seemed to extend to him as well. Nikita did not walk along the street, he seemed to float. He was not a fourteen-year-old schoolboy, but an artiste, a trainer, an aristocrat, who made the passers-by turn their heads. His face began to express a sense of arrogant superiority, an awareness of being someone special.

So Nikita felt superior to other people because of the merits of his pup.

How history repeats itself! Wasn't this just like me? Wasn't the pup just like the horse-drawn cab of my childhood?

I watched Nikita, waiting for him to come a cropper, like I had, dirtying his dream come true, the new pair of

Super Rifle jeans, which he had saved up for and bought from a black-marketeer by a second-hand clothes shop. But Nikita did not fall into a puddle, and his jeans remained intact.

The pup grew into a small dog and lost its good looks. The lack of breeding in his parents and ancestors—village mongrels—made itself felt. His head grew longer, the fluffiness disappeared from his legs and they became thin and disproportionately long in relation to his body. His behaviour did not change, but what had delighted people in the handsome pup, displeased them in the unsightly dog. Now Blackie's fawning on passers-by did not produce an answering affection, but more often an annoyed "shoo".

Poor Nikita seemed to lose his good looks too. The unsightly Blackie annoyed him. Nikita was embarrassed by him. I knew what would happen. I was waiting for Nikita to renounce his idol, like I had once rejected my beautiful, first New Year tree.

Nikita took Blackie out less and less. He would let him off the lead and come home saying: "He knows the way, he won't get lost!" Or go off with his friends, of whom there were more and more as the years went by and whom, as it usually happens, he liked very much but we, parents, not in the least.

Long-haired, wearing shabby jeans with foreign labels and fashionable patches, with guitars and noisy cassettes, they frightened us by their uncompromising conversations, their disrespectful manner, and their lack of similarity to our generation when we were young.

Nikita was just the same as them. The same long hair, the same categorical statements, the same stupefying cassettes player turned up full blast and deafening the whole house with its cacophony of foreign syncopation.

Blackie loved his master's friends. He also enjoyed being in noisy gatherings. He had even learnt to sing to a guitar. It was funny and pathetic. Ears pricked and head on one side, Blackie would sit down by the guitar-player, wait for the first few bars, then begin to yowl in time to the music, when some low notes were played. He yowled as if he were really singing, his range was varied and broad. Everyone would laugh as he tried his utmost, yelping, growling, whining, barking and yapping. It was sad

to see him trying so hard to please his master and his master's friends.

He was growing more and more like them. His coat was now so shaggy that you could not see his eyes. He would not bark any old tune, only modern jazz, and as he grew up he started having assignations with members of the opposite sex and spent more and more time away from home, turning into a real modern teenager.

One day we were out walking, Nikita, Blackie and I, when we met two pretty young girls. At the sight of them Nikita blushed with embarrassment and pleasure.

"Oh," said one of them in an angelic voice with an engaging frankness—her exclamation came straight from the heart: "Is that your little horror? What a sight he is!"

Nikita gazed at the girl, entranced. She was attractive and smartly dressed. My son I discovered had good taste.

"I'm fed up with him," he said, and kicked Blackie. Blackie whelped and ran off.

The girls stood and talked, then went on their way. Nikita hesitated for a split second, then waved his hand to me "Cheers" and ran after them. He remembered about the dog, however, whistled and looked round. But Blackie was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared into thin air.

"Don't worry, he'll turn up!" Nikita exclaimed carelessly and ran after the girls.

But Blackie did not turn up. He had disappeared, vanished without trace.

Nikita did not mourn him for long. There was no time, anyway, because the long hair battle had begun at school.

How much trouble it caused us, that hair. Nikita would not have it cut. He had grown it so carefully, so determinedly, and it suited him well. He wore it with a stubborn pride, as if it held the secret of his strength and standing in society.

But the little woman, the head mistress, was adamant. In the morning the teachers stood on duty at the school entrance, dispatching the long-haired boys to the hairdressers without delay.

Nikita demanded to be shown the governmental decree prohibiting long hair and refused to go to the hairdressers. He paid no heed to his parents' wheedling, entreaties and threats, and went on stubbornly asking for the governmental decree. The teachers' displeasure built up, like

a snowball, and a row was imminent. In the end I was summoned to see the teachers at the school.

I returned from this meeting with the feeling that my son's hair was not only a challenge to the collective, to public opinion, but also a state crime, and that I, without realising it, was committing a gross political error.

There was nothing that could be done. It was a complete deadlook.

I could not explain to Nikita why his long hair was immoral, because I did not know myself.

Then Varya and I reached a decision.

No, it was me who decided. Not her.

It makes me tremble to think of it. I do not know when I first thought of the idea. But it did not cause me any pangs of conscience to cut Nikita's hair while he was asleep.

"No, no," said Varya. "We mustn't".

"Well, what can we do then?" I asked.

"I don't know, but we mustn't do that. I'll talk him round. You'll see."

She had tried talking him round many times before without success. And it was the same on this occasion too.

"No, no, Mother," sang Nikita gaily, as he got into bed. "Night, night, folks. Put the light out."

"Don't be stubborn, Nikita," I said. "Listen to your mother. Go to the hairdressers tomorrow morning."

"Don't, Dad," he said imploringly. "It's not a question of hair. It's a matter of principle. You've always taught me to stand up for my principles. I'm right and you know it. I am right, aren't I?"

I said nothing. I just leaned over, as usual, and kissed him goodnight, and Nikita shifted away, as usual. He did not like demonstrations of affection. Just as I, his twin, had not liked them when I was a child. I barely managed to brush his cheek, my lips brushed over his forehead and the kiss landed somewhere on the top of his head in a mass of doomed curls. My kiss of Judas did not turn me to ashes. It was not bitter or bloody. The touch of the delicate skin and fragrant hair was pleasant and sweet, and did not fill me with either pangs of conscience or the shame of betrayal.

"Good-night," I said, switching out the light and leaving the room.

"You won't do it, will you?" Varya asked, looking at me beseechingly.

"But what else can we do?" I exclaimed. "What else?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm so afraid."

"Go to bed, please..."

But she would not.

We sat in the kitchen, waiting for him to fall asleep. Varya tried to read humorous article in the *Literary Gazette*, but she didn't feel like reading. I drank tea with fruit fudge, my favourite sweets. I like them when they are a bit dry. I like chewing their sweet, hard mass, working it with my tongue. So I chewed fruit fudge and waited.

I remember being perfectly calm. I was not afraid of what I was about to do.

An hour passed.

Another thirty minutes.

"I'm going now," I said.

"Wait a moment," Varya retorted. "Another half an hour."

I waited another half an hour. No, not quite. My patience ran out.

"I'm going," I said.

I did not turn on the light for fear of waking Nikita. There was a little light from the kitchen, and in the semi-darkness I crept up to his bed on tiptoe, holding the scissors in my outstretched hand.

Nikita was asleep. He did not even stir while I cut his hair and took it into the kitchen. The hair was warm, alive, and still smelt of him. I wrapped it in newspaper and hid it in the bottom drawer of the kitchen cupboard.

"My hands are shaking!" said Varya in a frightened whisper.

My hands were not shaking, but my heart was beating as if I had just run a long-distance race. Ever since that day I have felt it constantly, ever since that day I have felt a pain in my shoulder and back and had difficulty in breathing, like I have now in this train that is carrying me into the unknown.

"That's that," I said, feeling not exactly conscience-stricken, but something akin to remorse. "Let's get some sleep!" I wanted to kiss her, but she drew back with a hurried, almost frightened movement.

I fell asleep quickly and easily and did not dream.

Today I am horrified at the ease with which I went to sleep after committing that murderous act. The awareness that I was a criminal who had shot at my own son behind his back came to me later, next morning. But that evening I slept the quiet, tranquil sleep of an honest man, although the crime was already committed, and my son's dead hair, his pride and joy, lay in the kitchen wrapped in newspaper.

When Nikita awoke and realised what had happened, he gave a faint cry and started to sob. He sobbed without tears, head thrown back, howling in a quiet, animal-like way, and shaking all over. It was a terrible sound, full of despair and hopeless longing.

"Please don't, my love, my darling boy," said his mother, while I watched him aghast. I still did not understand how deep was his grief and how inhuman the wrong that I had done him.

"That's enough, lad, be a man. Don't cry over spilt milk." I put out a hand to stroke him.

He recoiled from me in horror, jumped up and ran out of the house.

Ever since that day I have not been able to look him straight in the eye.

I sleep badly now, waking in the middle of the night and lying for hours in the dark unable to get to sleep again.

People think of me as a good doctor and a nice person. But why? What is good about me? Is it my words, my lectures to my children, my wife and my acquaintances—there are many good souls like that, preachers who try to teach others to be humane. No, this is not self-reproach. It is the bitter realisation that one cannot make amends.

Now everything about Nikita, his movements, expression, his silence, was not exactly hostile, but wary. My "you mustn't!" now produced an automatic "I must". My words did not elicit any response. Nikita would listen politely, but do as he wanted. That blessed time had passed when he had no secrets from us, when he shared his joys and sorrows with us. Now he grew more withdrawn each day, keeping himself apart from us. We tried not to remember that terrible night. There was no enmity between us, nor was there any friendship.

In the evenings Nikita disappeared. He would vanish into space after a quick look at his homework.

"Wait a moment, where are you going?" his mother would cry, but he was already slamming the door and disappearing into the night until the early hours. Where, why, to whom—we did not know.

We sat and waited. An hour would pass by, then two, three. It was eleven, twelve o'clock, but still he did not come. The minutes slipped by and with them our lives. Varya and I aged rapidly in one evening. When the light was out in our room you could see the night street. I stood by the window, waiting, numb with fear from imagining what could have happened. When Nikita suddenly appeared in the empty street, I heaved a sigh of relief and forgiveness.

"He's coming," I said to Varya. She covered her face with her hands for a moment, relieved of her fears. He gave a long, merry ring at the door bell, but when we opened the door and Varya tried to find out by sniffing discreetly whether he had been drinking or smoking, he suddenly breathed right into her face and became withdrawn and aloof.

"Where have you been? We were so worried," Varya asked each time. "Where, son?"

She would try to pat him on the head, but he shrank away, saying:

"Well, I'm not there any more," and went off to bed.

Shortly after that I was summoned to his school again.

"What are we going to do?" the head mistress asked. "Your son has been behaving badly again, running up and down the corridor, shouting and tripping up a younger boy."

Her pupils had dilated, her face was flushed and became prettier. She was an attractive woman, a bit dull, but good-looking, and somebody probably loved her and whispered sweet words to her. Someone must say sweet, tender things to her, because her face had a definite charm.

"I cautioned him," she said, blushing with indignation. "And what do you think? He said that I had started a cult of my own personality in the school. I've never heard of such impudence!"

At home I said to Nikita:

"The head mistress is complaining. You've been at it again."

"I was just running into the canteen and bumped into her. Surely that's not a crime too?"

"You were rude to her."

"She's stupid!"

"Don't you dare," I said. "Don't you dare talk about grown-ups like that!"

"Even if they are stupid?"

Oh dear, how pathetic and helpless my words were. I dragged them out of myself with shame and an almost physical pain.

"Even if they are stupid, eh?" he repeated, averting his gaze, looking past my eyes and face. He was sparing me. "She's stupid, and you know it."

"You were rude to her, you must apologise..."

"Apologise? Do you know what she said? That I was a disgrace, that there wasn't an ounce of goodness in me, and that prison was the best place for me. Prison's the best place for me, eh? Apologise?"

He turned and went out, slamming the door.

An hour passed, another, and there was no sign of him. Five hours. Six. Still he did not appear. Evening came and went, but he did not return.

Varya was sitting in the kitchen, face in hands, numb and motionless, a piece of ice whose coldness spread over the flat, freezing me, too, with a quiet terror.

"Varya, darling," I said. She did not reply or stir.

Nikita came home about three in the morning. He was drunk. I could not believe it at first, because I was stubbornly convinced that my son would never do a thing like that. It was other people's children that drank wine at that age. But Nikita was drunk. He untied his shoelaces with drunken, fumbling hands and flopped onto the bed without undressing.

"You're drunk," I said.

"I'm tired," he muttered. "Leave me alone."

Varya was sobbing in the kitchen.

"You're a fine one," I said.

"Sure," he retorted. "I'm drunk and you're sober. You are all saints, and I'm a disgrace, an obstacle to progress... Good-night."

He turned to face the wall, and I saw the back of his

head. It was shorn. His hair lay in the kitchen drawer.

That night Varya and I did not sleep. There were many such nights. We sat numb and silent opposite each other in the usual scene of our sufferings—the kitchen. The old Moser and Co. clock from my childhood ticked away on the wall, the pendulum swinging relentlessly and evenly from side to side. Back and forward, back and forward.

Who was to blame for what had happened? Me? The head mistress? We were both to blame. Both of us had done our best to break his spirit. Perhaps the only solution now was to move Nikita to another school.

The head mistress could barely conceal her delight at this decision. She was tired, sad, worried and, as ever, convinced that she was right. She said it probably was best for Nikita to move to another school where they knew nothing of his bad behaviour, and where he could pull himself together and turn over a new leaf perhaps. She would give him a good testimonial. Let him make a new start.

She was kind, condescending and pretty. I thought that someone must be in love with her, this little woman, and whisper sweet words to her, telling her that she was his angel, his one and only. Someone must kiss her, not knowing that I was writhing in torment because I could not protect my son from her.

I left her, after thanking her for promising to give Nikita a good testimonial. I could hardly drag myself home. My body was old and weak, still mine but somehow different, full of pain—no thoughts or desires. I was as hollow and empty inside, as a dark, cold well.

I walked along Leninsky Prospekt, where I had been living for many years. I liked it because it was unique. It had grown up before my eyes in the open countryside on the edge of old Moscow. I walked, but saw nothing. Trolleybuses and cars sped along, people crowded into the shops, but I seemed to pass straight through them, feeling only the light, fleeting touch of their bodies, like a cobweb. It was as if they and I lived in different dimensions. The noisy, motley, fast-moving life whirled round me, like a carousel, but I was not part of that turbulent throng. It was like a dream, a distant memory. I was present, but not living it, there, but not there, sensing everything, but feeling nothing.

I finally reached my block and went into the entrance. There I stood, leaning the back of my head against the wall, resting from the pain and loneliness. The old notice warning people to be careful with gas and electrical appliances was still hanging on a nail in the entrance. A cat was sleeping on the radiator. Everything was as usual, yet everything was different. The entrance, the cat, and the notice. The same, yet different, as motionless as a copy.

I did not go up to the flat, but turned round and went outside again, wandering off in the direction of the university and Lenin Hills, in search of solitude.

In the park behind the university they were mowing the grass, quite silently, as if in airless, empty space. The scythes swung right and left, flashing in the sunlight, and the dying cut grass dropped obediently to the ground. I walked away and lay down in the grass that was still alive. I wanted to cry, to sob like a child, but the tears would not come.

I had forgotten what tears were! It was years since I had cried, so long that I could not remember when. How terrible that I could not cry. I had forgotten what tears were.

We have forgotten many things. Tears. Sin. The word has disappeared as if it never existed.

The university spire gleamed in the sun. A plane flew over, grazing a cloud. It moved along slowly and silently as a cloud. I wanted to return to the past, to stay there forever, pure, young and fearless, to accuse the living from my unknown soldier's grave. How easy and noble it was to die then. Easier than for me to live now.

I buried my face in the warm grass. It smelt of sun and damp earth, of warmth and coolness together. Suddenly I felt someone nuzzling my back, a little higher, my shoulder and neck. Cautiously, like a damp leaf wafting from a tree onto a bare body.

I had experienced a similar feeling long ago, the tenderness of an unfamiliar touch, so I recognised it at once, although many years had passed, yet feared I might be wrong, I dared not lift my head or open my eyes.

But I did lift it and saw her, the little horse, gazing at me with its huge, beautiful, violet eyes.

I did not stir for fear of frightening the vision. But it was not a vision. I could feel the horse's moist breath.

I stretched out a hand, and she touched my palm with her velvet lips.

It had grown quiet and peaceful. I felt at ease and saw that I was weeping real tears, as in childhood, when I buried myself in mother's warmth seeking reassurance, forgiveness and understanding.

The horse stood by me for a moment, then trotted off slowly, lifting her slender legs high, into soundless space.

I had to go on living. To drain my cup of joy and sorrow to the dregs.

In this tranquil state of harmony with myself, of spiritual equilibrium, calm and hope, I returned home. Was only the head mistress to blame for the fact that my son had grown away from me, from my world and her world? We were doubles, she and I. Look in the mirror and who do you see? Yourself? No, her!

Nikita was lying on the divan, his feet pulled up, reading the latest piece of science fiction. He was floating somewhere in interstellar space, his school books lying on the table amid piles of papers and all sorts of rubbish.

I sat down beside him. He shot me a quick glance, then went on reading. How can people live like he and I were living, as if we were in outer space, side by side, but as remote from each other as if we inhabited different galaxies. He wanted to get through to me, I know, he could not help wanting me to hear his voice and understand the strange language of his planet. Who should try to understand the other first, him or me? Probably me, because it was harder, perhaps even impossible, for him to understand my language, as ancient as the grunts of Stone Age man.

"Put your book down, son, and listen to me," I said.

He put the book down and waited with an estranged expression, remote, aloof, almost hostile. I intended to say something very important for myself and for him, but sensing his coldness I became afraid of saying nothing or not saying the main thing that I should perhaps have said long ago and that, even if it did not help us to find each other, would at least open up a little path to our hearts. I was not sure whether he would understand me, or whether he was mature enough to sense my pain. Still, I had to get it off my chest. Even if he did not understand me now, he would remember my words some time later,

and with the memory perhaps understanding would come too.

I had to tell him that I had betrayed him by being the little woman's accomplice. By upholding her authority (because that is what one is supposed to do—uphold the authority of the school teacher), I had helped her to break his will. I had agreed with her, thinking that I was protecting him, but in fact I had betrayed myself as well, driven myself into slavery. I had to tell him this. My conscience was not waiting for redemption or his forgiveness. I had to tell this to him as a warning: don't ever compromise on anything, be firm and steadfast to the end, like a soldier in the firing line, never go against your principles, even for what seem the noblest of motives, because your reward will be slavery. He was right, my son, not I. I had to tell it to him, so that he would gain confidence. For he would be a father one day and have to try and understand that children, our mistaken children, are always right.

I told him everything, moved by my own frankness. He listened impassively. I waited for him to say something, but he was silent and would not look at me. Then he got up and said:

"There's a girl waiting for me. I'm off."

I suddenly felt empty, bitter and ashamed of my confession, my self-reproach, my helplessness before him, my son, and my own conscience. The noble fervour, the self-deception of purification, which had gripped me when I was delivering my speech to Nikita, gave way to despair. We had not come closer together but moved even farther apart.

"Wait a minute, you silly lad," I said and tried to embrace him. But he stepped back with trepidation, dislike, even hostility. "Don't go, let's have a talk," I said. "Please. I want us to understand each other."

"What for?" he exclaimed, turning an embittered face towards me. "Don't worry. I won't go on the bottle. I can't stand the stuff. Nor will I go down on my knees to that old cow. So don't expect me to."

"I don't want you to. I tried to be honest with you."

"I don't need your honesty," he interrupted, almost crying. "You don't have to make a confession. How can you say such things about yourself. Don't you understand?

You were a hero to me, I was so proud of you. No, you don't understand anything..."

He gulped back the tears, so that I would not see them, made a despairing gesture and went out.

Much later I realised that my frankness had not strengthened, but almost lost me my son's respect. But I do not regret it. I think I acted rightly. Nikita will understand some day. Or will he? It is my strong wish and faint hope.

Where am I going? And why? Where is he, Victor Travushkin? Did he really exist or is he a figment of my imagination?

It was wartime. I was lying in a frozen dug-out near a little hill, that we had to take at all costs. This hill was my war, my front. We slowly advanced towards it, storming it day and night. More and more lives were lost. We had to advance towards this hill of death. But we wanted to live, oh, how we wanted to survive...

We took it in the end, after about a year of bitter fighting. Other soldiers on other fronts were advancing and liberating cities. Moscow fired them salutes, but there were no salutes for us. My war began and ended by this hill near the village of Pogoreloye, in the Valdai marshes.

Where am I going? Who is he—Victor Travushkin? Why am I going to see him and not to the vast communal grave on the hill which had no name, only the terrible number 035?

Do you believe in magic? Do you believe that people can summon the spirit of the dead or resurrect a person who has lain in the grave? What a ridiculous question! Of course, not. Neither do I. But if you keep on calling to a dead man, to someone who has vanished into eternal darkness, perhaps he will materialise and answer this despairing cry? That's nonsense, isn't it?

Probably what happened that evening was just a dream. Nikita was out. Coming home I met Varya on her way to the shops. I was tired, so I lay down on the divan and must have fallen asleep.

A ring at the door woke me. I opened my eyes and lay there, listening to the vibration of the ring, but could not bring myself to get up and open the door. Yet there was no one to do it except me.

Do you believe in premonitions? Of course, not. Neither do I. Of course I did not sense or feel anything. I just lay and listened to someone ringing the front door bell, but was too lazy to get up. It is only now that I imagine having had a sense of anxiety, a kind of vague presentiment. As if something prodded me to hurry up, as if some voice told me to get a move on or the person who was ringing would go away, and that must not happen. I jumped up and almost ran into the hall.

I opened the door and was not surprised to see a stranger in colonel's uniform staring at me in some confusion and embarrassment.

Of course I am only imagining now that I recognised him at once. How could I have recognised someone I had never seen before.

I did not recognise him, but realised that it must be him and no one else. He had no time to say anything, or perhaps I did not hear it in my excitement or did not understand it, before I threw open the door and invited him into the flat, like an old, long-awaited acquaintance. And he was old, this acquaintance of mine, my "second half", my conscience.

Outwardly I was not excited, outwardly I remained calm, but my heart was thumping like billy. I cannot remember thinking that the person in front of me was a corpse, a man who had been killed in air combat many years ago. At least I don't think I did. My main feeling was not surprise, but a sudden sense of being found out. As if an old crime had at last been discovered, I had been caught and would now receive the punishment I deserved for stealing someone else's fiancée.

He had grey hair, the handsome face of a manly, strong-willed person and clear transparent eyes. I did not like the eyes, they lacked emotion and were hard and obstinate. His body was well-built, strong and firm. He was obviously not going to seed like me with my complaints of middle age.

He asked me if Varvara Anatolyevna lived here, explaining that he had known her at school and had been meaning to look her up for a long time, but hadn't got round to it. He said something else, but I hardly heard it. I said that Varya would be back soon, led him into our room and left him there.

I left him in order to be on my own for a few minutes, to collect my thoughts and sort out what had happened. But without managing to collect my thoughts I returned to him and started some small talk. We said nothing about the main thing. He asked me no questions and I showed no interest in anything.

I learnt later that something rather common in wartime had happened to him too. Although he was officially reported killed, he did not lose his life in the air raid. He survived by some miracle, spent a long time in various hospitals, then returned to active service. After the war he went to Siberia where his family had been evacuated, instead of returning to Moscow. He still lived there.

He told all this to Varya later, and for the time being he and I sat and made polite conversation, the weather, the cinema, our children—like Varya and me, he also had two children, a grown-up daughter and a teenage son the same age as Nikita.

We waited for Varya but she did not come.

We waited a long time. Eventually the door lock clicked. I went into the hall and took Varya's bag of groceries from her. Looking at my face she asked anxiously:

"Has anything happened?"

"Yes," I said. "We have a visitor. Don't be frightened or surprised. Go and say hello. Talk to him. I'll go and get some wine."

"Don't frighten me," she whispered. "Who is it?"

"I'm not trying to frighten you. It's your old friend."

"My friend?" She went pale and taut. "What friend?"

"Go on," I said, kissing her cheek clumsily, and went out onto the landing.

I was shaking all over, and my heart was fluttering in my chest like the pendulum of a broken clock. I stood for a moment, leaning against the wall and trying to stop shaking, then went down to the yard and joined the noisy domino players slamming down their pieces with great abandon.

I did not buy wine and deliberately did not return home. I sat and played dominoes. One hour passed, then another. I played for a long time, until the shadows were creeping out of every nook and cranny.

Varya found me and took me home.

On the landing by our door she stopped and turned her tense face towards me.

"You're crazy, dear," she said, tenderly, as if it were a declaration of love, and kissed me on the cheek.

I knew this kiss. It was cautious, timid, and shy. It was a repetition of the kiss long ago on the landing that decided our fate and that I cannot forget.

Life had passed and old age was upon us. The best years had gone, and now at last I heard the precious word from her. It was not for consolation that she kissed me like that. Varya never lied. She could not lie even over small things, elementary, everyday trifles. This kiss, which took us back to our distant youth from approaching old age, was a sincere burst of feeling. Could it be that the man who had once taken her love from me had returned from the next world to give it back?

And had Varya's declaration perhaps come too late? Did I need it now? Was there perhaps only bitterness for me in her timid, anxious kiss?

How were we to live now?

How quickly time passes and how the train speeds along. I do not know exactly what hurts me, everything seems to be alright, but my whole body is aching, groaning, as if everything inside me had been shifted about and was looking for its usual place.

It was terribly stuffy. If only the train would stop, just for a minute. I could get out, breathe the fresh air, lay down on the soft grass for a minute, and everything would be alright. If only the train would stop.

Miracles do not happen, of course. Yet as if in answer to my entreaty, the train began to slow down and eventually stopped. Goodness only knows where or why, in the middle of a morning field covered with tall, dewy grass.

"Good!" I thought. "Marvellous! How wonderful that the train has stopped. I am lucky, after all. I'm a lucky person."

Revelling in my good fortune, I climbed out of the carriage onto the ground, took a deep breath of fresh forest air, and began to feel better.

I could travel on now. But the train was still standing, so there must be time. I could lay down in the grass for a minute. Then all my wishes would come true, like in

a fairy tale. I ran into the dewy field, away from the railway cutting, and lay down in the grass. It was both warm and cool.

It was good lying there, quiet, calm and free from anxiety, and reassured. I became filled with hope and faith again. Now I knew that everything would be alright, everything would end happily, because life likes happy endings. While placing limits on its heroes, it is always just and generous in the end. So there was no need to worry or have regrets about anything: everything would turn out well. The little woman would realise her errors. Varya would forget the unforgettable and get better, and wise mankind would renounce war once and for all and live in peace and harmony. Even my journey into the unknown to the young soldier Travushkin would end happily. I would find him, return what I owed him, and he would relieve me of all my sins.

The pain returned and I groaned, only to realise that it had gone as instantly as it came, and I was groaning for nothing, without any cause. It was nice and quiet lying there, reassuring, as if I had eaten a delicious, big meal. Like millet with pumpkin. Funny that I should think of millet and pumpkin as if that's the most delicious thing in the world. I haven't had it for ages, only when I was a child. Mother used to cook it often. But as a child I could not stand cereals of any kind and I don't like them now either—so why did I think of millet and pumpkin as a most delicious dish? "That's stupid," I thought and groaned with fresh pain. I laughed at the cowardly thought that, God forbid, I should give up the ghost here and die quietly in the tall grass of this sunny field, amid wild flowers. It would be a nice death, of course, a very nice one, but all the same I must wait. Who would keep Varya company in her old age? Who would protect Nikita from the little woman? And what about the new jeans I had promised to buy him? No, I must wait.

I opened my eyes and saw a blue flower on a long stem, a bluebell perhaps, with a ray of sunlight on it and a velvety bee. I smiled at my fears. The pain was receding, bringing me relief and filling my body with quiet joy. I felt good and lay peacefully, knowing that people were going about their business, flying on planes, travelling

in cars and lorries, building towns, bringing up children, walking on the moon, planting corn, forging iron, healing the sick—doing all sorts of things, but I had nothing to do now, except rest and enjoy the calm.

The grass whispered in the breeze and I lay with eyes closed. I did not open them deliberately, because I knew what would happen now. It had happened before. I had been lying on the grass with the sun shining and sorrow in my heart, and then, at the most painful moment, she had come and I had felt her breath.

I really did know that she would come, the little horse that lived in the meadow. There she was, my instinct had not deceived me. She was standing and looking at me with her beautiful violet eyes. I laughed, stretching out a hand, and she brushed my palm with her moist, velvety lips. Then off she went, lifting her slender, well-bred legs high.

She turned round, motionless for a moment, then went on, as if inviting me to follow. Unexpectedly a small animal jumped out of the grass, a young lion. How had he got there? He ran alongside the lovely horse, carefully, as if protecting her.

Almost happy, I watched them go. The train was still standing there. I still had time.

## Vladimir Lichutin

# SERAFIMA

## Scenes from White Sea Village Life

*In fond memory of*
*Raissa Ivanovna Zhuravlyova*

**Who shall judge betwixt me and thee ...**

***Avvakum***

The news of Chrysanth Kren's death reached Vazitsa yesterday. Probably only a week ago he had boasted about his strength, trying to bend a poker. Then, after getting smeared with soot, he stared gloomily at his frail wife and threatened with a kind of malicious persistence to send her packing, the devil take her! He was sick and tired of supping cabbage soup from the same bowl as her. He'd get himself a woman with a bit more life in her, soft as a feather bed. As for him, an old horse ploughs better furrows. He spoke in a mumble, unabashed by the guests, as if he were chewing buckwheat, his bloodshot eyes glittering darkly. But his wife, Serafima, only sniggered, holding back her tears, and rubbed her dry hands.

And now the courier had brought the news that Chrysanth Kren had died a troublesome and awkward death for his family, although only a week ago he had been assuring everyone that he had two hearts, both made of stone.

But it was hard to believe that he was lying in his coffin. He had seemed destined to live forever. Looking at the gnarled, awkward body you thought the inexhaustible running power would never dry up, nor would his forever reckless and tipsy soul that didn't give a tinker's cuss. But it was a terrible business, if you think about it, ridiculous and terrible, because they say he left home fit as a fiddle to go and catch some nice fresh fish, and even

took his granddaughter along. I can just imagine him lying in the shelter of branches and straw, waiting for the dusk, when all nature would sink into a dreamy trance, and taking an occasional but greedy swig from a bottle, flinging back his head and muttering indistinctly afterwards, as if he were chewing buckwheat, while his granddaughter, curled up on her bed of grass, was deep in the land of dreams, her trusting cheek sensing the morning freshness of the river, the quivering rustle of the aspen trees, and her grandfather's incomprehensible mumbling. The nets had all been checked, and his waders were pulled up as far as they would go. They cut into his groin and kept reminding him of the job awaiting him. Any minute now it would be time to creep stealthily up to the pebbly cliff, pull the inflatable rubber dinghy out of the bushes and cast his nets so cleverly that even the most thorough inspection would not reveal them. And, as if to round off his solitary meal, he shook the remains in the bottle, and threw back his head, stretching his wrinkled neck and leaning with one elbow on a grassy hummock. Then a flash of electricity must have shot through him from the top of his head to his calloused heel, burning him with pain terrible in its suddenness and twisting every vein in his body, and then his heart choked, faltered and fell silent.

And when the world came alive with birds and shaggy lungwort, the granddaughter's expectant heart softened (she was waiting for her grandfather call to get ready and come along with him, because it was just the right moment to cast the net) and fell into a very deep sleep. Then, her chilled body searching for a slanting ray of sunlight, she almost fell out of the shelter into the bright blue morning in this trance. And then the blinding sun probably penetrated deep down into her body, warming the blood, and the girl woke up and crawled around sleepily, trying to creep back into the shady darkness of the shelter and go to sleep again. And then she came upon her grandfather. For some reason he was sprawled out awkwardly on an armful of grass. The strange thing was that he didn't smell of tobacco, fish or bonfire. Now he had no smell at all and seemed cold and strange.

Then Anya, having despaired of shaking her grandfather awake and cried her eyes out, caught the smell of decay at

noon and, fearing it, pushed off the rubber dinghy and tried to get over the river. But how could a weak, nine-year-old girl hope to get the better of the Kurya, when it was a job for a grown-up man to row to the shore. Anya must have splashed at the high spring water, as thick as coffee grounds, for a long time, but the oar was too small. You can't scoop up much with a tablespoon, and you can't get far without the know-how. She soon grew tired from grief and the sun, gave up in despair and surrendered to the power of the water, which drew her eagerly along, sweeping her out of the side channel away to the turbulent main stream that ran swiftly down to the sea. It was a good thing there was no wind and she was not carried onto a sandbank or the rocky shallows by the shore and sucked into the foaming, tossing stream. Only brute force can withstand a northern river straining with ardent passion towards the sea. So Anya was not destined to die young.

They say that some casual fishermen picked her up by Birch Cape and took her home to her mother and grandmother Serafima and that when they arrived from Sloboda for Chrysanth a worm had already lodged in a grey curl on his forehead and there was a foul smell.

So someone I knew has died. But is it such a rare event for people one knows to depart from this world? Each day the space around me gets emptier and emptier. So why should this death, of someone I did not know that well, have shaken and fascinated me so?

"He tormented her and she tormented him, they both tormented each other."

And what about Serafima? How many times she had seemed to stop caring and turn to stone, cursing Chrysanth: "Why don't you kick the bucket, you old sponger." Then she would start back in horror and amazement, as if waiting for a death blow from her husband, hunched up into a quivering ball, her head drawn into her shoulders, and when the blow did not come, she was immediately alarmed by her own cruelty. "How could I say a thing like that! I should keep my mouth shut." But Chrysanth received her cursing silently as if he had not heard it and only lowered his head, his strangely blazing eyes glaring at the table.

Where is Serafima? Fussing about in the lonely nooks

and crannies filled with darkness, cocking her head to one side and listening alertly, waiting for the sound of the familiar voice. It's a good thing, if her daughter Nastya is with her. If she has extended her leave and is helping her mother get used to her new life alone.

Has this news really shaken me up again and filled me with an anguish that seems to turn my heart to ice and make everything I look at seem dull, anonymous, painted in sad tones? Obviously anguish, trouble, joy, kindness and anger bear within them a kind of energy that turns these sensations into something concrete and palpable, which you feel you can reach out and touch, measuring their density and depth. Apparently sometimes you can see anguish with your own eyes. It is grey, no, a mousy colour, has a bitter stuffy smell, and looks like a haze shrouding everything around you.

Trouble too, probably has its own smell, colour and other characteristic features. Otherwise what makes an animal that has always trusted its master run away from him in fright into the far corner of the shed when beasts are being slaughtered? Or perhaps trouble has a universal natural designation as yet unknown to us, and it can flow freely from one creature to another, from a man to an animal?

People sometimes say that animals can understand words. They probably understand not the word, but the emotion contained in the sound, which is the same for all living creatures... When a sow is let out, it rushes squealing out of the sty with a crazy thirst for freedom and runs around in the yard for a long time, like a mad thing, cooling its fevered heart. But then comes its turn to be slaughtered. Its master's voice is sadly ingratiating and guilty, his expression somewhat confused and evasive, directed sideways into the distance where crests of forests rise and grey smoke drifts over the houses. The creaking sty doors are pulled open, and although the sow cannot yet see the knife with its dull blade and the grey groove along which the blood will clot, from the atmosphere of awkwardness and anguish which seems to envelop the whole world at this moment, the animal senses and guesses that it is about to die. It is full of this death in advance. For it the whole expanse outside the door is full of ashes and anguish, so the animal runs away from it,

hiding in the dark, in a far, damp corner, where the logs are covered with mould, and stares, huntedly, at the man approaching who reeks of death and decay. Does this mean that a person gives off the odour of death at such a moment?

Recently Chrysanth had often boasted that he had two hearts, both made of stone, and that he could run up a hill without getting the least out of breath. People say they were in such a hurry to put him in his coffin that they didn't even shave him. The old man's jaw was hanging, so they tied it round with a white spotted handkerchief, but the bristle was as stiff as wire and stuck through. There were not many people at the funeral. Only Serafima and their daughter Nastasia, and some distant relatives. The other children who lived further away didn't have time to come pay their last respects because it all happened so unexpectedly.

The last night in July was enjoying its freedom. The sky was a brassy yellow traced with a few red veins (tomorrow should be fine). The sea, swollen like a jelly and warmed by the sun, lay peacefully within its shores, and its constant, rolling boom receded, withdrawing into the salty depths to gain new strength. A seagull perched on the fence. You could see its coal-black, snake-like eye, one waxy, well-cut wing and the dark shirt-front. It sat there expectantly like a notary. When the window whined, the bird started up in alarm, ruffled its feathers, then settled down again, with only revulsion and indifference in its dim, snake-like eye. The bright silvery expanse, that seemed lightly sprinkled with dust, rocked outside, with the seagull keeping guard over it.

Why am I here and not there, in Sloboda, in that ravaged sad room with the smell of decay? Nastasia is probably not asleep. She'll be sitting on the birch block by the door. The damp air envelops her, she feels shivery and draws the warm black shawl around her... There are so many words teeming inside me now that I feel sad and constricted. I am saddened by these unspoken words that melt and burn to ashes in my heart. It is as if everything that happened, has been erased at one fell swoop like a dream, suddenly and clearly. But surely it can't be my sick imagination, a half-crazed dream, when a man wants to love so badly that his night visions are full of living

pictures... Nothing happened and that's a fact, yet I have the feeling that everything happened right down to the depths into which only two people who love each other plunge. Well, what actually did happen? Nothing at all, except for a few glances and some tired words as if between strangers. But I still remember all your movements, the turn of your head, the commanding, impatient gesture of your hand, the sad undying light in your eyes, and the sudden kiss that burnt my hand, and I believe I have known you for a long time, perhaps all my life.

Sometimes my head spins and I feel that I can sense the past, present and future, as if I already know how I shall live and how I shall live through what remains to me... Perhaps the geraniums are so pungent, so enveloping that my heart stops beating. Who groaned? Where did that groan come from? Can I be so full of love that I actually groaned?

Then someone groaned again, slowly. Could it have been me?

The sound of reluctant footsteps on the planked footway filtered through behind the neighbouring houses and, as if from their rhythmic beat, a tightly twisted bird cherry leaf broke off like an umbilical cord. It had faded early, sucked dry by the caterpillar, and now fell noisily and agitatedly on the edge of the window-sill. The leaf's edge was rough, eaten away until it had become transparent, and the dead, sunken vessels were bloodless. The steady footsteps sounded nearby, round the corner, and the leaf, as if pursued even in death, fell into the faded grass.

Misha Kren was walking down to the sea, as was his custom. His face was an iron blue, tense and covered with untidy, grey hair, flecked with ginger under the moustache and his eyes gazed deep into himself, and nothing else could attract their attention. His blue breeches reached down to his very ankles, also an iron blue, and his bare, horny feet struck the wooden planks like hoofs. The once white shirt, now eaten away with soot and sweat, hung loosely on the lean body. Give the old man a shout, call to him, but he will not respond to your friendly greeting, or at least only give you a mute, blank look from his trance. Kren went down to the sea along the sandy ridge, sinking heavily into the floating

drifts barely covered with limp, silky grass, and lowered himself tiredly onto the whale's vertebra, brown and weather-beaten.

From what cleft in the mighty Kren tree did this uncouth clumsy offshoot appear and strain stubbornly up to the sky, neither withering nor flowering? It was time he pushed off and bit the dust, but he clung to the world grimly, as if showing off his strength. For what purpose, for what secret need did this gloomy and threatening branch spring forth on the Kren family tree?

But wait a minute, Chrysanth Kren must be a relative of his, a close, blood relative: their fathers were brothers. Chrysanth had probably sensed he was going to die and that was why in his last few days he kept stirring up his memory, reaching far back in it, and inviting us to follow him. He kept trying to remember the family legends, as if some superstition were already whispering to him that he would die and no one would remember him, no one would know of his long ancestry...

Where is Nastasia now, I wonder. She must know what I am feeling. But will she give a thought to me now? However strange her father was, however insensitive he had become, his daughter was very attached to him. Blood's thicker than water. Darkness has descended on their house now. They sit like night birds, silently, and sleep passes them by. Anya's face is tense and animal-like. Her dead grandfather will not let her sleep. Her eyes are heavy as lead. It's high time she was asleep, but then something seems to carry her along and spin her round, and a black abyss yawns before her and in that abyss she sees grandad Chrysanth alive and drunk, swaying helplessly on the bottom, unable to reach the fresh air. Anya should open her eyes, but it is hard to lift the leaden lids, and she is afraid of her mother terrified by her peaked, ashen face. The girl's lashes quiver and with them the long shadows in her cheeks. The wine-coloured, bitten lips also quiver, and in the blue-black shadows under her eyes hovers an undried tear. Nastasia can probably see the nervous tic on her daughter's face, how each vein on it and the tense cheekbones are quivering, and, to calm her, she sings in a hoarse, tired voice. And through the stony heaviness Anya feels that her mother's voice is

coming from under the ground, and that it no longer has any affection, only indifference and aloofness.

*Lullaby, my little Anya, lullaby, my little one.*
*Come to our house for the day, Puss,*
*Not to work we call you here,*
*But to rock our Anya dear.*
*We will give you if you try*
*A glass of milk and a piece of pie.*
*And for Lent a radish top.*

I did not let them know that I was coming to Sloboda, but Serafima received a sign in a dream and was expecting a visitor, so she greeted me accordingly as the person of whom she had been thinking constantly and impatiently. As soon as I crossed the threshold and announced myself, she became convinced that there was a secret spiritual bond between us, which had brought me so unexpectedly to their house. "What a good thing you didn't send a telegram, eh? It's so good that you didn't let us know. I used to love arriving unexpectedly too, didn't I? I'd rush in and say 'Here am I, make a fuss of me!' Now then, Timofei Ilyich Lanin, let's take a look at you."

The old woman stretched forward trying to reach my head, and from the clumsy, groping movements of her timidly outstretched hand I realised that she was blind. I hurriedly pushed forward my face, shoulders and chest, and Serafima, who was standing right next to me, got lost under my shoulder, so frail and withered was she in the faded flannelette house-coat that did not cover her cone-like knees. How my memory had betrayed me! I had been five years old when I first met her, when our family was billeted here for about two years, and then Aunt Serafima was a fine, erect, big-eyed woman, with a soft, deep laugh and a warm, kind hand, who would stroke me in passing and give me a hot pasty or doughnut and feel genuinely sorry for me. I had always remembered her like that and this was the person I had come to see, so my first impression was a great shock. I even thought myself tall and well-built by comparison with Serafima Anatolievna, although it must be confessed that I am definitely on the short side. The old woman again reached up and touched my head, pushing my hair onto my forehead, then suddenly gave a shrill, infectious laugh. "Oh,

you're one of us alright, Timofei. The same kith and kin, eh? I've gone blind now, Timofei. Been blind for about two years now. Not completely, though. I can see the sun, faintly, like an egg yolk," said Serafima sadly. Hiding her sudden tears and somewhat embarrassed in front of her unexpected guest, she scurried over to the stove behind the door, as if retiring into her den, and lit a cigarette. And all that could be seen of her was the sharpened, almost lacquered face with a web of wrinkles, staring hard at the ceiling, and the nimble fingers with the cigarette.

"Where are you, Father? Come out and say hello," Serafima ordered from behind the door, and in came old Chrysanth whom I had never seen in the wartime, because he was in the army. It was as if he had been waiting for the call. He came out of the room at once, huge, towering up to the ceiling, with a villainous air. God help anyone who met him on a lonely forest path. His hair was grey, unkempt and too long, in curls, and thin matted patches of skin shone through the dirty grey hair. The nose was heavy and swollen from frequent drinking; the eyes were bulging and faded, probably once a pale blue, the lower lip protruded, and out of the black bottomless pharynx came a stentorian voice, although at first I could not make out the words, as if the old man were munching buckwheat. Chrysanth was obviously pleased to see me and asked, with a respectful bow, how I was keeping. I replied that things were going pretty well, every day brought us a bit closer to the grave, so we mustn't complain, to which he gave a hollow, gurgling laugh. The old man was obviously delighted that an unexpected guest had arrived and that life would be different today, more joyful and renewed, and he could drink again, to arrivals and departures, and the fresh fish soup, and all sorts of things. Just let the esteemed Serafima Anatolievna dare say a word of reproach.

"Aye, life's nothing but waiting for the grave these days," Chrysanth agreed, donning a sad expression and glancing at his wife, but she merely turned her head and said nothing, so the old man began to talk. "In the old days they ate differently, shiver my timbers. There was soup and a good chunk of meat so you could stuff your belly, and top it with grated radish and wash it all down

with kvass. And what kvass it was, eh? Fair stung your mouth. Not like the stuff today that's nothing but water, all chemicals and atoms, shiver my timbers. No tinned food in those days, I'll tell you that, Timofei Ilyich, that's why we was all healthier. It's the war spoiled everything, turned people into a lot of old crocks. And the winters were proper ones then, forty or forty-five degrees below was nothing out of the ordinary. The steam came off you when you worked. No jerseys in those days. You wore jackets down to your knees. You'd be standing up to your waist in snow loading two sledgefuls of hay and the sweat would run off you. And your hands never got cold. You just stuck your mittens in your belt and get on with the job. I remember when I was working at the pelt depot, the skins we used to get. The pelts were so shiny it almost hurt your eyes. Throw them on the table and the tails reached the floor. Today they bring in skins the size of a mouse..."

He stood in front of me, stooping over as if trying to be on a level with me. He had completely forgotten that I had just arrived and might be tired or not in the mood for it. He just kept on munching, sticking his sharp bristly chin right in my face. Fortunately Serafima, who had finished her cigarette, interrupted her husband: "Listen, you old rascal, you're wearing him out. He's tired after his journey, right? And wants a bite to eat and a drop to drink, and there you go talking your head off with all that rubbish. Don't listen to him, Timosha, it's not everyone that can understand him these days." She gave a short laugh and disappeared behind the peeling door. The old man shot a venomous glance in her direction, so full of unconcealed hatred that my heart sank.

Chrysanth went to put on the samovar, driving Serafima from her usual spot, and she moved over to the window, muttering to herself and smoothing down her white hair, and perhaps it was this shining hair or the noonday light streaming in the window that made her old dark-complexioned face resemble lacquered ivory. "What a good thing you came, eh? How clever of you to think of it." With the vague unease of a person who has arrived in a new place, I looked round in silence at the house, recalling what it had been like, and it seemed so

neglected that my heart sank once more. They had both lived long, full lives. Serafima had been a schoolteacher for forty years, and Chrysanth had had a decent job, but there were no signs of plenty in this house. The broad Russian stove that took up half the room was painted a dark ochre and the crack along its swollen belly was tightly bound up with wire. There was a copper wash-stand in the chimney corner which had been splashed with water so often that the rusty wall-paper had peeled away from the wall and looked like worn old felt. The dresser had been made by hand with an axe. It had some coloured pictures from magazines stuck on the back and half a dozen plain cups and some glasses. And the table was roughly made but solid, the lower parts scuffed by dirty feet. You could see that old people were living the end of their lives in this house, whiling away the time as best they could, and that no one was worried by thoughts of future affluence. Everything was as it had been, as if thirty years had not passed, but then the house had been cleaner, better kept and warmer, and everything had born the imprint of a caring female hand. When my mother quarrelled with her father-in-law in the town and rushed off in mid-winter to Sloboda, where no one was waiting for us with open arms, she happened to find refuge with her old friend from Vazitsa, Serafima Anatolievna, and on this very stove amid the rotting felt boots and jerseys, iron griddles and all sorts of clothes and footwear together with the owners' three offspring, we got through that hard war-time winter fairly well and warmly. And when I examined the stove curiously, recognising the old chips and scars on it, I was filled once more with a warm gratitude, as if I had remembered my dear mother.

Serafima had a knack of being able to hide away in any old corner. Now she had settled down by the table, almost disappearing under it, and was working quickly with a knife, peeling potatoes. But from time to time she would pop up and listen intently, turning a keen ear to the open window through which came sounds from the evening street, the nearby meadow and the neighbouring yards. "Where have the girls got to?" she kept saying irritably. "Here's a nice visitor, and they've disappeared. I want to introduce you, Timosha. My

daughter and granddaughter are staying with us, and I want you to meet them. She's left her husband, too, you know. Can't think why they didn't get on." And from the way these words were said and the times they were repeated, they suddenly acquired a different, disturbing meaning, and my heart leapt. Already then I felt that something was going to happen in that house. From the clothes rack and the open door I moved over to the window and began to stare out impatiently into the yard, at the far end of which Nastasia would appear.

Flies swarmed by the wood-stack, and there were already deep shadows from the bird-cherry trees on the slope by the fence. Through the open gate in the distance you could see the edge of the meadow and a tiny sliver of the stream, pale in the evening light. Chrysanth had already laid the table and sat down, placing on the table his heavy, dark hands, that looked like knotted tree roots, each thick finger incredibly warped, with a yellow, scaly nail. You wouldn't have expected an old-age pensioner to do a lot of digging, but these grimy palms couldn't be scraped clean even with gravel. You could soak them in kerosene for a week, then they would get a bit cleaner and lighter. The old man kept staring at me and when I caught his pale-blue glance, he nodded happily and smiled, his bushy eyebrows standing up on end. Why was he so pleased to see me? What had I done to deserve such affection?

"You've forgotten something, Father," said Serafima. The light from outside fell into her magpie eyes and they came to life. "I ain't forgotten anything," retorted Chrysanth, giving me a sly wink. "You stay where you are, slow coach, now that you're blind and all." "Now don't you get up to your tricks, Crissy. You know how keen my hearing is, don't you? Sometimes I hear the old man in the kitchen saying 'Not a drop to drink', then he pours himself a glass and hides the bottle. And I go and tell him where he's put it. My hearing's that good! But he can sniff wine out anywhere. I hide the bottle, then he sits down on the bench, looks round and finds it without even getting up... My hearing's got very good now, hasn't it Crissy?" "An elephant stepped on your ear, that's for sure," the old man laughed demonically and gave another satisfied wink, including me in their time-honoured game.

They had lived their lives together, through all the ups and downs, and now they were glad of this amusement, happy with this simple childlike teasing. Serafima was not upset by his words, it seemed. They had obviously been said many times before, and taking offense was not part of their game and would only spoil it. So she agreed readily: "Perhaps my hearing has got better, but an elephant did step on my ear. One day Crissy was such a sly one..." "Don't call me Crissy, Crissy Crossy, I'll give you criss cross, shiver my timbers!" the old man burst out, his eyes bulging frighteningly. But Serafima did not appear to notice his anger, or chose to ignore it, and continued in her even, smoker's voice: "One day Crissy was such a sly one. He hid the bottle in his old boot, and sat by the stove singing, the devil. And I couldn't make sense of it. 'What's he so pleased about, sitting there by the stove?' I thinks to myself. As soon as I turned my back, he grabbed the bottle out of the boot and took another swig—the rascal." She fell silent, chewing her lips and obviously worried about something, then felt the table with her hand and repeated "You've forgotten something, Father." "No, I ain't!" exclaimed Chrysanth delightedly and banged down the bottle which he had deliberately hidden behind the samovar. "Come on, old girl, let's have a drop of what the doctor ordered. I want to wet my whistle." "What about the girls? We ought to wait for them," flapped Serafima. "They can catch us up. Just a little drop of what you fancy. Come on, old lady, bottoms up," the old man muttered through his nose. I could hardly understand him. I had relaxed and stopped paying attention for a moment and my wandering mind heard only a disjointed mumbling.

Why had he chosen me as his ally? What had made him take such a sudden liking to me? He winked conspiratorially at me and poured himself a drink, then poured a little drinking water into his wife's glass from the water jug, rubbed his lips, stood up filling the whole of the grey, dusty kitchen, and exclaimed loudly: "Welcome to this house, Timofei Ilyich. Come on, old girl, let's clink to raise the roof." "I don't drink much, but I can still manage a glass when I have to and when I'm in the mood," Serafima consented willingly and lowered her glass.

Chrysanth was watching his wife's mouth with devilish delight, without sitting down, and nearly burst out laughing, but then his expression soured and he hurriedly poured himself another drink. Serafima drank and a look of amazement appeared briefly in her unseeing eyes, but then she regained her composure, coughed and followed the drink down with some fish. "Ee, it's strong, the devil," she kept repeating hoarsely, coughing like men do after a strong drink. "What was that you gave me, Crissy, not spirits, was it? Don't know how people can drink the stuff." "That was water, hee hee. Don't pretend, old girl," Chrysanth winked at me again. "It was water, you silly cabbage. I poured you some out of the jug, and you was hoping for something stronger, hee, hee. Timofei Ilyich saw me. I poured it out of the jug." "Water doesn't burn your throat, Crissy. Water heals like balm. It slips down easily. But that stung me like a whip, " Serafima insisted firmly, without the shadow of a smile on her ivory face. "Silly old cow," spat Chrysanth, annoyed that the trick had not worked, and trying to look casual as he sniffed Serafima's glass.

Then salvation arrived as Nastasia appeared silently on the threshold. She emerged from the dark lobby like a vision, looked round smilingly at everyone and seemed to illumine me with her deep sad gaze, then exclaimed welcomingly: "Oh, we've got visitors... And you two are still fighting. Aren't you fed up with it yet?" "It's all his fault." "It's all her fault," the old people exclaimed together. They too had come to life and brightened up, and Chrysanth hastily filled his wife's glass. Serafima put her finger on the edge of the glass, licked it and giggled with delight. Nastasia took off the towel wrapped in a turban round her head, shook her silkly black hair, cut short and heavy from being washed, and moved easily to the table. "What about some wine for me?" she asked provocatively and looked sharply at me, obviously aware of my probing glance. "You're too late, lass," Serafima laughed again happily.

Nastasia had a dark complexion, like her mother, slightly swollen eyelids, thin sensitive brows, a dense sadness in her coal-black eyes and the same elusive grief in the severely sculpted lips. This deep sorrow immediately struck and amazed me, enthralling me too, as everything

strange and enigmatic does. It cannot be aid that Nastasia was particularly beautiful or alluring, but her face with its irregular features commanded interest. You wanted to look at it, as if you were responsible for this burning grief. She was beside me, yet so inaccessible that I felt a sudden sharp anguish and turned involuntarily to the window, casting an indifferent eye over the pink haze enveloping the nearby meadow and the thin twilight full of buzzing mosquitoes and smelling of mould by the barns. I could hear Nastasia arranging the knives and forks by my side, and caught myself thinking that she was constantly on my mind. So that was why Aunt Serafima had seemed so big, I grinned. She was carrying this sad woman inside her.

"You could hear a pin drop," said Nastasia, breaking the silence. "Have you good folks gone to sleep?" Before anyone could reply Anya burst into the room, causing a commotion. Still on the threshold she sang teasingly: "Grandad stuck grandma in a big jam jar, watered her down with rain, all to make her young again," then sat down at the table with her elbows on the table, kicking her feet and shaking her head. A real handful, and no mistake.

"Try and sit quietly, even if it's just for a minute," her mother scolded her, slapping her on the head. The girl calmed down at once, pouting her full lips, her small face poking slightly forward. Perhaps constant curiosity had made it like that. The glossy hair was drawn back in a bun. I sensed a certain sadness in her face. Evidently Anya already bore some strange secret inside her. But the girl soon forgot about the reprimand and the slap on the head and ate greedily and quickly, dropping food on her dress, moving her elbows, and also managing to put her arms round her grandmother's neck, kiss her cheek and shoulder, and anything she could put her lips on.

"Grandma Fima, you've got my dressing gown on. Look, Mum, she's got my dressing gown on. You should be ashamed of yourself, grandma. Give it back to me, come on." She pulled the dressing gown off Serafima's shoulders, rudely exposing the old woman's flabby neck and faded man's vest. The girl kept laughing nervously. Her cheeks had flushed the colour of cranberries and the

whites of her eyes had turned pink. Obviously something had made her worked up like this. It had been triggered off by the attention of all present, and now she was shivering with sick impatience. "Grandad Crissy, why has she put on my dressing gown... What does it mean? Is Granny going away under the ground?"

"I'm completely worn out," Serafima agreed sadly. Leaving the table, she shuffled into her corner, lit a cigarette and smoked it there, frequently spitting into an empty tin and gazing blindly at the ceiling. For some reason Anya's last words upset me, and made me take a closer look at Serafima and her granddaughter, noting what they had in common: the same narrow shoulders, long, thin legs with shapely ankles, slightly crooked at the knees, and the same long neck with a deep hollow above the spine. Yet one was nine and the other sixty-nine. A desultory conversation was going on at the table, each person absorbed in his own emotions, and it suddenly struck me what a hostile and incomprehensible thing time is... For when we are conceived in our mother's womb our time is not equal to nothing. We probably begin to live from some other frontier and until we are born our time is limitless, but when we get old it starts going backwards. So by being born we are living backwards not forwards, is that it? Then from something complete and whole man disintegrates into decay, into ashes. He returns once more to nature and disintegrates there, but he will never turn into a seed capable of raising a new person. So perhaps the living seed of a tree, a plant, an animal and a man, where everything is harmonic, merged into one, where time past, present and future are in the same skin, where an explosive energy is accumulated, where all man's qualities, his nature and his countenance are determined and designed—perhaps this is the perfection for which nature has striven? And perhaps it is the most refined form of compressed time? Serafima was sixty-nine and she was like a girl again, but her granddaughter was nine and at some point in time their paths had crossed, but the sad thing was that in moving ahead Anya was also returning to an unregainable state. Perhaps we are all returning, only by different paths and without seeing one another, so that we do not get alarmed. What crazy ideas I have suddenly got...

Then Anya must have been naughty again, because Nastasia's voice brought me back to the table.

"Calm down, I tell you," she burst out and made her daughter leave the table. "You mustn't get so worked up. You must control yourself, Anya, you're nine years old now." The woman finished her outburst weakly and guiltily, as if the words had sapped her strength. Sensing the weakness in her mother's voice and lack of firmness, Anya jumped up angrily, shot her a glance of murderous contempt from under her sharply curling lashes, and shouted with forced tears and exaggerated suffering in her voice:

"Why keep nagging your daughter? What's she done?"

"Leave the room at once," said her mother trying to look strict, but barely hiding a smile. Anya flounced out, slamming the door. "She's just showing off," said Nastasia, but everyone was silent. While this battle of words was going on Chrysanth had managed to empty his glass twice and was now deeply flushed and staring menacingly at his wife. But Serafima's face was radiant, smooth and inspired, and her eyes had begun to gleam.

"Don't get Anya all worked up for nothing. Don't nag her over trifles," Serafima advised her daughter. "She's beginning to mature."

"I know I shouldn't," Nastasia agreed meekly. "But just look what the little devil does to me. She can twist me round her little finger. She senses her power over me. She knows all my weak points, and she's only nine. What'll it be like later?"

The company at the table, which had never really got going, had broken up unexpectedly, and each of us was now living in his own world. Perhaps the stuffy heaviness before a storm, when many a heart sinks into mortal anguish, was harassing the earth, weakening the will and killing desire. Chrysanth was working himself up into a frenzy. His grey curls had fallen over his face, almost covering his eyes, and the old man's eyes looked yellow and unpleasantly sick. He was muttering something to himself, his black mouth had almost disappeared in the silver bristles, and it was impossible to make out the hurried, half-swallowed words. At first no one listened anyway. They were not interested in Chrysanth. But his voice gradually found the right key, the coughing and

gurgling stopped, the sounds became clearer and the words more meaningful.

"Ee, he's off on the last rites again," Serafima grumbled gleefully from the doorway to interrupt him.

"I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to Timofei Ilyich here. So you keep quiet. Allays butting in... You don't remember anyone further back than your grandfather, do you? No... So shut up shop, if you've come from an old devil like that. No one could pull up our family tree. Its roots go deep in the ground. I can still remember my great-great-grandfather Vanya. All we Krens today are from him."

"...Vanya was the first person in Vazitsa to have a gun, so that's how long ago it was. They say he chewed the bullets with his teeth and was a good shot. Never wasted any gunpowder. When he got old, it was harder to go into the forest, but he never lost his passion for hunting, so he didn't give it up. His old woman Stepanida played a trick on him. She took the barrel off his gun and left him with the gunstock hanging on his shoulder. And off he went, the old boy, walking round the forest with a stick and thinking it was a gun. They say he carried a watch in his pocket until the day he died. The knob got all rubbed away, and his hands went numb, so he had to use a vice to wind it up...

"Now where was I, let's think. Vanya lived to be a hundred. When he got married, as a young man, of course, there was a sorcerer at the wedding table. You couldn't have a wedding without a sorcerer in those days. He was the most important guest and kept everything in order. Suddenly another sorcerer came without being invited. Probably wanted to upset the wedding and bring bad luck to the young couple. So the one who was already there says: "Go away. Don't spoil the wedding. Stand by the post where the horses are tethered, like you was a horse too." They say the uninvited sorcerer went out and stood by the tethering post and stayed there for two whole days while the wedding went on."

"Vanya's wife, Stepanida, died in her ninetieth year. For fourteen years she was all hunched up, her head almost touching her knees, and she couldn't unbend. She even slept hunched up. But she straightened out when she died. She'd lie for about ten minutes, then shout: "Turn me

over, grandad." So she died, and on the sixth day Vanya, who was a hundred by then, went to stay with his son in the town and dreamed that he saw his wife there. "Why have you left me, grandad?" she said to him. So he hurried back home. His soul felt all strange. It was getting ready to depart. He had a kind of presentiment. And as soon as Vanya crossed the threshold of his house, the paralysis got him and he died the next day. So that was hundred-year-old Vanya for you, a Kren through and through. They say he could kill a bear with a spear. I saw that bear-spear myself in the storeroom. It had a handle as thick as your arm. Just think. The bear rushes at you and you aim the spear at its heart. But you mustn't be afraid, or tremble, just wait until it springs and stick the knife in rightaway. That takes a bit of courage, I can tell you."

"Vanya had two sons, Pronya and Kona, both lame, one in the right leg, the other in the left. They both lived in the forest and were crazy about hunting..."

"Why don't you shut up, Crissy. Or talk about something else for a change, eh? This good man here has had a long journey. He'll be wanting to get some sleep, I expect," Serafima could not restrain herself from interrupting him. She would have liked to talk to their visitor too, but it was not the right time for that. She wanted to ask him all about Vazitsa, how everyone was getting on there, and about her old friend Julia Paramonovna. But Serafima had decided that she would wait for a better moment, when the old man was not around, and then find out all the news from their unexpected guest. And a flood of joyful expectation made Serafima forget herself for a moment in the little kitchen, fling up her arms, on which the flesh hung like rags, and exclaim: "What a good thing you've come, Timosha, eh? What made you think of coming, lad?" And, not waiting for an answer or, rather, not expecting one, she disappeared into the room. Immediately a kind of scuffling and peals of laughter could be heard from there. "Ee, don't tickle your old grandma. You'll be the death of me." The door was flung open and Anya ran through the kitchen.

Chrysanth had also disappeared. He had probably gone off to get some wine in Sloboda. The one bottle had not been enough for him, and he would wander around until

he got the odd glass poured by someone's generous, already drunken hand. That's how things are these days. I give you a drink today, and tomorrow, when my heart grows heavy and the pain becomes unbearable, I will come uninvited to you, and from my anguished look alone you will understand without being told, and your hand will stretch out for the hiding place where a bottle has been concealed from the old woman.

Through the open door I saw a wide bed, on the edge of which sat Serafima in thin sports trousers and a man's white vest. She was sitting straight and tense, either trying to make out something dimly on the ceiling or listening to what was going on in the kitchen. Suddenly she sighed with unconcealed anguish: "God forbid that anyone should go blind." Then she collapsed on the bed, as if paralysed, leaving her hands above the blanket. But something must have been worrying her, for she unexpectedly sat up and stretched out a hand towards the wall, where her balalaika was hanging, and plucked the strings.

"I must tighten them again. They're out of tune. You should have heard me play earlier. I even used to accompany the P. T. class on the balalaika. But now my hearing's going." The old woman probably sensed that someone was listening, because she spoke loudly, as if inviting me to say something. "Oh, Timosha, do everything while you've still got the strength. Later on you'll have moss growing in your head. I can feel the moss growing in mine. It's pinching my head and pushing my hair up. Grandad called me a silly fool today, and that's what I am... But who is he to talk? The old bull." Serafima giggled shrilly, then broke off at once. "How is your school there?"

"Closed down, Serafima Anatolievna. Not enough kids. The kids go somewhere else these days, Aunt Serafima. We hardly had enough for four classes. The rest of them are all coming here, to the boarding school in Sloboda. I applied to retire, but they told me to go on until my pension. I'm going to be a forester... So they asked me to come to Sloboda to get some preliminary information about my new profession," I finished sadly, almost choking from the long and insincere account. "Still I'm glad it's happened like this. That I've left the school. I wouldn't

have gone otherwise. I'd have hung on by the skin of my teeth, cursing my fate. But now..."

"No need to justify yourself to me. I'm not your judge, am I?" Serafima reproached me, without listening to the rest of my involved story. "Oh, look at me! Haven't finished my jobs yet." And she disappeared behind the door by the stove, lit a cigarette hungrily, and asked me no more questions from behind the cloud of smoke. To be honest, I was tired after the long and wearing day and, not waiting for a chance question which would prolong our wearing conversation indefinitely, I hurried outside.

Nastasia had obviously already put her daughter to bed in the barn and was now sitting alone and depressed on the old log that took the place of a porch. All the time that I had been in the house she had not looked in my direction again or attempted to start a conversation, as if she found me repugnant. Now too, after raising her sad eyes for a moment, she did not invite me to sit beside her, but again sank her chin down to the hem of her dress, pulled tightly over her knees. At first I felt a sudden embarrassment and irritation, I wanted to say something scathing, but restrained myself. Unable to leave at once, I lingered at a distance, sitting on a stack of firewood. The evening was unusually dark and stuffy, although it was July, the height of the silvery white nights, when the soul rests peacefully, full of a bright melancholy and the expectation of goodness. But purple thunder clouds had piled up menacingly, there were occasional flashes in the distant hills, and a light damp breeze had risen from the river, announcing that rain was imminent. I felt that I had wanted to be alone for a long time, to stand by the fence, but suddenly at the sight of Nastasia, sad and depressed, I felt drawn to long and frank conversations again.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked hoarsely, as if trying out my voice.

"Death," Nastasia replied calmly, looking at me with distaste. This cool answer embarrassed and confused me. All my words vanished and I felt terrible, not so much because of what had been said, but how it had been said, in such a tired and weak-willed voice. Excitement sent a rush of warmth inside me and I hastened to help this

woman, although I realised that my words were banal and irritating.

"Try not to do that. Just don't think..."

"But I always think about death," Nastasia interrupted me, as if she already knew what I was going to say. I thought she was joking and stared suspiciously, but she looked sad and sincere. "Don't worry, Timofei Ilyich, I'm fond of life. I won't try to drown or hang myself. But I always think about death, and this does not stop me from living. One day I tried to get rid of these thoughts, they really are strange... Don't you find them a bit strange, Timofei Ilyich? Yes, one day I tried to forget them. But do you know, it was so hard and boring, as if something inside me had been broken... As if only half of me remained. Have you ever been lying in bed, Timofei Ilyich, and felt as if only half of you was there, not all of you? Well, something like that. It's strange... It is so horrid and uncomfortable not being able to feel your whole self, and you want to get yourself back at once." Nastasia spoke quickly and eagerly, as if she had been wanting to talk about this for some time, but had not found a sensitive listener, and so had stayed burdened with her thoughts and grown sick of them, which was why so much sorrow lay in her coal-black eyes. Her own words, uttered somewhat coldly and arrogantly, had made her rise, and she tossed back her heavy hair to reveal a high forehead, a little too big for her face.

"The same thing happened to me... It was like that all through last year. Thoughts like that make everything around seem dark and miserable," I insisted, as gently as possible, not concealing my pity and bewilderment. But Nastasia seemed not to have heard me. She was already far away, absorbed in herself, and now looked particularly like her mother with her habit of hiding behind the door. She had gone dumb, devastated by her recent confession (as I assumed) and her face seemed to have aged a great deal. It was as if she had enveloped herself in thoughts and was staring out at me through them in weary aloofness, as if through a mist. I thought she had withdrawn completely and I was about to leave when she began speaking again:

"When I left my husband, everyone turned against me. They kept accusing me of breaking up the family. But

I could see they didn't give a damn about me. They would have preferred me to become a tart, but I wasn't having that. They thought it would be better for me to have a good time and sleep around, as long as I didn't break up the family... I can't stand violence, see? Can't stand it. If I love someone, I'll put up with anything except pity and violence. Don't pity me. If anyone tries to impose his will on me, I might kill him. Yes, I could do that easily."

"Just like that? Well, I never," I drawled, to hide my embarrassment, and how could anyone help being embarrassed by words spat out so angrily. I do not know what direction our sudden conversation would have taken, under that tense, lowering sky with the long flashes of summer lightning, in a night saturated with the sickly sweet smell of ripening nettles and awaiting the foaming rain, if Anya had not suddenly rushed out of the barn, trembling and crying. As if fraught with a superstitious meaning and depth, our words were immediately forgotten. Anya slipped out of the shadows in the yard like a ghost in her white pyjamas and huddled up to her mother, crying genuinely and bitterly. She had suddenly become a child for the first time in the whole day.

"I can't sleep, Mum, I'm frightened."

"Frightened of what?" Nastasia had not yet calmed down after her recent confession, and her daughter's pitiful words left her unmoved. "Frightened of what?" she repeated coldly, dragging herself away from the conversation with difficulty.

"Someone's breathing into my face. An old woman told me if you dream of someone breathing it means someone is going to die."

"You mustn't believe everything people tell you. Think about something nice. You're a big girl now, nine years old."

"What is there that's nice? I can't think of anything."

"It was a kind old gnome with blue eyes who was breathing and keeping watch over you while you slept, so no one did you any harm," I chipped in unexpectedly. The child's tears had disturbed me. "Every house has its goblin, with a bushy beard, big ears and kind eyes... He keeps watch over us, don't you believe me?" I caught myself saying something unsuitable again and shut up

at once. Anya had stopped crying to listen to my unexpected and, for her, strange words. If it had been daytime, of course, she would have latched on to me and pestered me to tell her about the goblin, where he came from and where he lived. But now she looked at me sadly with her sunken dark eyes and, trembling probably from her dream, buried her head in her mother's dress.

"I'm frightened. Someone's breathing in there," she moaned again, more calmly now, playing with her voice and squeezing out a tear. "Breathing like this. Huff! Huff! When I opened my eyes there was no one there, but when I closed them the breathing started again."

"What's frightening about that, for goodness sake? You must be sensible. I can't stay with you all the time..."

"I'm frightened, Mum. Come and lie next to me."

Nastasia realised that there was nothing for it and allowed herself to be persuaded. Without saying goodbye to me, as if she had completely forgotten about me, she took her daughter into the barn. I could hear the two of them moving about and lying down. The springs of the old bed creaked as they got into it. Anya was already laughing playfully and pestering her mother with questions: "What'll we do if the gnome comes, Mum?" "Go to sleep," was the nervy, tired reply, bur Nastasia immediately relented and began singing hoarsely in a gentler voice through her sleepy torpor: "Lullaby, my little Anya, lullaby, my little one. Come to our house for the day, Puss ..."

The storm did not come after all. There were flashes of lightning and hollow rumbles in the west, probably followed by heavy rain there, then darkness moved away unexpectedly from Sloboda, and the sky began to glow quietly from within, the damp air from the distant rain drifted here, moistening the foliage and grass, and a light spray settled on me too. The restlessness that had been troubling me troughout that endless evening melted away, and suddenly my dizzy head, nausea and tiredness in every bone told me how exhausted I was and how I longed to sleep. Well, go to bed then. But why could I not make myself? Why was I denying my natural desires, as if fearing to carry them out, as if by so doing I would pronounce the death sentence on myself? I should have

been fast asleep by now, smiling in my dreams at something vague and nice, flying under a blue dome. Goodness, how long it was since I had flown, what heavy boots I must be wearing now if I could not soar up anymore.

Serafima was stretched out rigid on the bed like a corpse. She was not breathing, and her whole face, an ashen grey at night, had grown pointed. The permanent smile had been wiped off her unsightly lips, and her motionless face was full of grim attention, as if the old woman were trying to divine some kind of secret. She was sleeping so lightly, that at first I feared she might have died. Not a sigh or a snore, only the occasional gurgle from her chest, as if the last vestiges of life were departing from her. Again I stopped and asked myself why I didn't lie down peacefully. As if I sensed and expected something terrible... I collapsed lazily into bed, barely pulling back the blanket, and immediately sank into a sweet, long-awaited torpor, but I deliberately kept myself on the verge of sleep. Some remote corner of my memory, or, rather, not mine, but someone else's, told me that Chrysanth had come home. He mumbled for a long time, unable to calm down, and climbed into bed heavily with no thought for his sleeping wife, but I listened with a kind of heightened awareness, not allowing myself to relax, and only when the old man's fitful snore hit the ceiling and his night waggon rattled off over bumps and potholes, did I calm down and give myself up eagerly to sleep.

In the middle of the night I suddenly awoke with the strange sensation that I had overslept, that it was bright daylight outside, and I should have got up ages ago. I opened my eyes, unable for a while to recall where I was, and through the doorway saw the frail figure of Serafima. Seen from the back in the sports trousers, the vest slipping off one shoulder, and the boots with high, hard tops that covered her knees, she looked like a teenager. The night bird was busy at the table, beating, pounding and hammering with her little fists, her shoulders jumping up and down, the blades dancing, and her small white head shaking,—she was making dough. There was a smell of yeast, of rising dough. It must have been this smell that made me wake up at night, when the air, still a cobweb-gray and unsteady, was painting everything in dull, dirty tones. But I had not heard Serafima

put down the dough to rise. The old woman must have slept for a bit in the evening, snatched a little shut-eye, until Grandad came home and that put an end to it. Afterwards she had probably thought it would be nice to bake something fresh for tomorrow and had got up to make the dough and put it on the stove. After that she must have jumped out of bed several times and groped her way to the stove, almost tripping over the step, to find out whether the dough was rising. She was worried that the stove might not be warm enough and she had wrapped the saucepan in some jumpers, and then lay down at Grandad's side again, without daring to close her eyes because of a new fear that perhaps there was too much heat now and the dough would rise up quickly, knocking its cap sideways, then puffing quietly, the porous, breathing, bubbly mass would furtively knock the lid off, spill out and slither over the dusty, worn bricks in a thick layer. Then she would have to scrape it off with a knife, with her husband poking fun at her, and give it to the neighbour's pigs. No, it was better to miss a bit of sleep and jump out of bed again to make sure. So now Serafima was wrestling with the white dough, squeezing it, rolling it out along the board, pinching, tossing, swinging and twisting it, and pummeling it with her weak fists, then pulling them out with a squelching sound. Then she pinched off a piece from the soft inside and chewed it for a long time, turned dreamily towards the stove, and from the meek expression on her face I realised that the dough had turned out well.

With this quiet vision, which I thought I had imagined and which suddenly reminded me of my childhood, I drifted back into sleep, a deep sleep like an abyss, and for the first time in many years I flew. I flew low, but strangely. As if I were circling my arms round and round over my head, and then something fell off me, my body seemed to dry up, lose weight, and become filled with air, and I took off smoothly, soaring up for a moment. But each time my soaring above the earth seemed accidental and fraught with danger. A husky voice was calling me from behind, laughing crazily, and to get away from this insistent voice, I kept revolving my arms in circles until my shoulders ached but it became

harder and harder for me to fly, as if I were losing my feathers and my bones were being filled with sand and ached. In spite of this my heart sang with the brief flight, and I returned to earth reluctantly, pining sweetly and seeking to extend my state of oblivion. I suddenly felt that someone was watching me, breathing hotly, and the strange, persistent breathing alarmed me. I opened my still unseeing eyes timidly, unstuck the eyelashes and saw close to my face a few curls streaked with yellow on a pale skull, two bushy eyebows and a pair of dry, black lips emitting a stale smell of alcohol with a whistle. My first irritable thought was that it would have been better to dream of a wood goblin or a house sprite, but Chrysanth's broad smile soon lifted the weight inside me, my spirits rose, and I smiled back, hoisting myself firmly up on the pillows.

"Sleep well, Timofei Ilyich? Had a good night, did you? I got plastered last night," the old man said repentantly, then gave another broad smile and squatted on his heels. "You've been sleeping like a log. Training to be a fireman, are you?" I said nothing, listening to myself, and suddenly realised that something had happened to me in the last twenty-four hours. It was as if I had been stroked gently inside with a fine brush, and the pain that had nagged me constantly, had suddenly disappeared.

"Let's play cards?" Chrysanth suggested, and before I had time to refuse he had shuffled the cards clumsily, frequently wetting his wooden fingers with the thick nails, and was dealing them out on the blanket. The sun filtered through the window, a pattern of shadow from the foliage flitted on the floor, and the soiled wallpaper over my hosts' bed shone with a lemonish light. There was a sizzling, spluttering and, frying in the kitchen. Waves of vanilla and cinnamon floated from there. The bronze head of a pestle tapped sleepily in the mortar. The kitchen music, the air fragrant with spices, the slight hum of the Russian stove and the gentle morning sun streaming through the window made me feel light-hearted, and I unexpectedly agreed. "Alright, I will. Haven't had a game of draughts for ages... Ah, we know how badly you play, we do!" I said playfully, suddenly remembering this quotation from Gogol's *Dead Souls*,

Serafima looked out of the kitchen holding an iron mortar and threatening her husband with the pestle.

"I'll give you cards. Are you crackers? Go outside somewhere."

"Shut up, old woman. Don't interfere," Chrysanth said hoarsely, casting a stern glance at his wife. It's nothing to do with you.

"I bet I know more about it than you do. Your head's only good for boozing. Your cauldron's all rusted up from drink. You won't find a scrap of sense in there. Hee, hee," cackled Serafima. "There's a spider in your head, weaving a great big web."

"Alright, laugh if you must," whispered Chrysanth. The old woman listened hard, one ear turned in his direction, but did not catch his reply and began to pound evenly with the pestle again. "Watch out, Timofei Ilyich. I've got a red-headed queen here, and you can't beat her. You haven't got a bloke to put on top of her. The knave's too ugly, and the king's out of action. His thing's worn out. Here's the queen, Timofei Ilyich, a real good-looker. She'll be handy round the house."

"Alright, hand her over... Haven't played a game of cards for ages."

"Here you are, lad. Careful she doesn't burn you. Mind you don't come out the loser. You know what women are. They make you up a nice soft bed, then they don't let you get a wink of sleep. Choose a woman who's one of your own kind, don't marry above your station, then you won't regret it. Why does Fimka put on airs, eh? Because she thinks I'm a fool. Boasts about her brains, the silly ass, and her posh family. Forty nine years I've lived with her, and I don't remember a single good day." Something had upset the old man long ago and obviously still tormented him, and he was glad of the chance to unburden himself again. "I'm from peasant stock. I had two years' schooling and learnt to swear there. But she's a school marm. She thinks she's above me, but I tell her 'Stuff and nonsense, shiver my timbers, you're a cabbage stalk, not a woman, and your family are all blockheads.' When that brother of hers turns up, you'd die of laughing, he's such a show-off and a liar. One day he asked me to go fishing with him, said he knew a good place where you could catch buckets

of them... No, listen, don't interrupt me, shiver my timbers. 'Last Sunday,' he says, 'I caught buckets of perch, not very big, mind you, but each of them had a glassful of caviare... And if we don't catch a lot of fish,' he says, 'we'll dig up sackfuls of roots and steam them till they're sweet as honey.' Ee, the liar... 'And if the worst comes to the worst,' he says, 'and we don't get no roots, we'll distil some birch sap. I brought two buckets back once (the lying devil), poured them into a wooden jug with some sugar and got such a strong brew that two glasses of it knocked you over. The cork flew out of the barrel and stuck to the ceiling...' I knew he was lying, the rascal, and I didn't believe a word of it, but he went on blowing such pretty bubbles that I fell for it. So at five in the morning I took my tackle and a bucket and went to the place he'd said. I waited and waited, but he didn't turn up. Then people started going to work, and I felt a real ninny... So I went up to his house and banged on the window, but he was fast asleep. He rushed out in his underpants apologising like mad. I just turned round and went home. And they're all like that, windbags: full of hot air... It's me, not Fimka, that has a family to boast about. We're cast-iron through and through, carpenters and farmers. Take me, for example." Chrysanth assumed a dignified air. The once blue, now jelly-like, bloodshot eyes bulged, the grey brows arched, and the broad smile stretched from ear to ear, surprisingly childish like his complaints.

"So Vanya had Pronya and Kona, both lame in one leg, and they used to go hunting. They were both awfully strong, right from birth, and they had no equals in the whole of Vazitsa.

Some of the natives started making trouble when they were hunting. Pronya and Kona caught the rascals in a forest hut. They didn't lay a finger on them, but they bent their guns in two.

"Pronya was the father of grandad Eulampii, and he had six sons, how's that? They still tell a lot of stories about him. More likely a load of bullshit, it's easy enough to make things up. They say he joined two boats together, fixed a wheel paddle between them and used to paddle along the bank in style. He trained two wild geese to be as tame as sheep and obey his voice. When he set off

somewhere the old man cried 'tigi-tigi' and the geese flew up and perched on the prow...

"He invented a foot mill as well, and a self-propelled trolley on wheels for carrying things. There's brains for you. God gave him brains alright, but he didn't know what to do with them. He was a bit of a crank... His eldest son Alexeiko was my father, and his next son was Fedka who hanged himself.

"Listen, I counted one hundred and fifty relations alive now, then I got tired of counting and stopped. They're the men. The girls have gone off to other families and had bairns, so there must be Krens all over the place now. But just try getting them together again. They're like strangers to one another, not kith and kin. They only know they're related from stories. I got three lads, three lasses, and a few more that died. One day I was coming back from hunting and they tells me my youngest lassie has died. 'Never mind,' I says, 'we'll soon make another one.' Hee, hee.."

I soon gave up playing cards. They called me to eat, but Chrysanth remained sitting on the edge of the bed, ruminating. I shot a quick glance at myself in the mirror, afraid of seeing a puffy, unprepossessing face with bags under the eyes and grey cheeks. But perhaps the sunlight streaming into the room had dispersed the air and woven intricate fine shadows in such a way that I hardly recognised myself in the pearly surface of the mirror. The man who looked back at me was young and happy, with bluish-black hair neatly parted, a lively gleam in his large brown eyes, and tiny candles flickering deep down in the pupils. Surely it couldn't be me? Even the full lips, pale from a long sleep, did not spoil my face today.

I had been called to the table, but in the kitchen the cooking was still in full swing. Serafima's thin shoulder blades were jogging up and down madly under her flannelette house-coat. She had been busy since early morning without a moment's rest, and now, her tongue sticking out with the effort, she was mixing something in a big bowl with a wooden spoon, occasionally popping in her finger and licking it to find out what the mixture tasted like. "See what we've got up to, Timosha... Nastasia and I got to thinking that here we were with a visitor

and only a few dry scraps to feed him on." Nastasia was busy with a mop by the stove with the practised hand of a true country girl, flushed and blooming, looking slightly wild and intoxicated by the heat, with two moist little dimples in her fresh cheeks. "Training to be a fireman, Timofei Ilyich?" she asked mockingly, her gaze lingering on me, and for the first time I saw no sorrow in her face. "You've nearly slept the clock round." I smiled stupidly, for her words seemed to me to contain secret meaning. But old Serafima had not heard us and she interrupted our conversation. She had got going now, reminiscing about days gone by.

"Sloboda folk are great coffee drinkers. Always have been. And you can't drink coffee without baking something to go with it, can you? The first thing people ask when they come to a wedding in Sloboda is who did the cooking. And if the food's not home-made, the wedding's no good..."

"Want to give us a hand, Timofei Ilyich?" Nastasia teased. "Are you a dab hand at it?"

"What are you on about, lass? He's a visitor," Serafima pretended to be angry, then laughed. "An apron would suit our Timosha. He's not very tall, is he? He'll be like a girl, like a daughter to me."

Paying not attention to her mother, Nastasia slipped an apron round me and sat me down to mince potatoes. I submitted, meek as a lamb.

"The kulaks in Vazitsa made up a ditty that went like this. 'In the reign of Emperor Nicholas we ate flour made into fritters. Now the Executive Committee's in power, we use straw instead of flour.' And I said to them: 'Just you wait. The day will come when we'll turn up our noses at white bread.' And that's just what has happened. Today nobody wants shop-made food. All Sloboda folk bake on Saturdays now." Serafima paused, ruminating thoughtfully, her face blank as she stared through the wide-open green window where nature was running riot outside.

*The morn breaks forth, the waters flame*
*And o'er the lake a gull doth skim*
*And in that free expanse so broad*
*A ray of sunlight gilds her wing.*

"It's a funny thing but women steal secrets from one another. A neighbour will run in asking for a feather because she's got nothing to glaze her pastry with, but her eyes keep darting all over the place. For ordinary days there are about fifteen sorts of pastries and pies. And in every house they are served with tea. Some good cooks bake about thirty different sorts of pastry to serve with coffee on special occasions. Each holiday has got its own special pastry, whether it's Christmas, Easter, Shrovetide or name days. Before I went blind I used to bake raisin *krendel* for name-days, that was the thing. And make it as high and splendid-looking as possible. If the *krendel* didn't rise, it meant the person hadn't long to live. And if it was hollow in the middle it meant the person would die. If the *krendel* didn't turn out very well, you didn't know what to do with it. You couldn't just throw it away, that would have been a waste, but you couldn't show it to the guests either... It probably was true, if it had been handed down through the ages, eh?" Serafima raised her eyebrows, listened for a moment to the noise in the kitchen, and sighed. "No-oo. They wouldn't have invented that for nothing. Sometimes it was funny. The *krendel* was baking, rising in the stove, then suddenly, whoops, and it flopped. I used to bake Napoleon cakes, black gingerbread with fillings, *kalach* wheatmeal loaves, rum babas, shortbread, fruit dumplings, fish pie with salmon, halibut, viziga, and, of course, cod and eggs, meringues, curd tarts, apple pie, sugar biscuits, straws, marble gingerbread, puff pastry, cream horns, and mint cake. It fair takes your breath away to list them. And that wasn't all. Without cookery books, too. And the funny thing is that if you just go ten kilometres away from Sloboda to the next village, they give you nothing but potato cakes..."

"I like potato cakes. I don't want anything else," I said, to attract Nastasia's attention. But she was busy at the stove and did not look round, flushed from the heat, but light-hearted and happy in her work, poised attractively on her shapely legs. Everything about Nastasia, whether it was her bust, her neck or the dimples on her elbows, was shaped, perhaps not with elegant refinement, but with the feminine charm of a strong body which did not find the exhausting business of

cooking a burden. Now the first *shangas* appeared, shining and golden, nicely browned on the underside. They emerged from the stove, giving off a tempting odour from under a towel, and such a delicious smell invaded the kitchen that all the other household smells disappeared and you immediately felt ravenously hungry. Bread seems to possess the power to rejuvenate a person, to take away his years, and put him on his feet again, even a sick person, and the very sight of baking in full swing is a joy to the heart. If you take a *shanga*, still melting in the middle and put it in melted butter, yellow inside and slightly foaming on top, and then, lingering slightly to inhale the appetising smell, put it into your mouth and chew it slowly, you feel as if your inside is being oiled with nectar and this full, wholesome taste fills and uplifts you. That is why I have never seen a bored person at a table with Russian cooking. Even the sickliest person who suffers from an ailment that precludes him from partaking of the feast and can only inhale the delicious odours given off by the old stove and the female heart, the silky flour and the sourish yeast, even he will grow rosy-cheeked and his anguished expression will soften, albeit briefly. And what if the meal is presided over by a bonny lass, who has won your heart...

"Oo, how tasty. You're the best cook in the whole world, Mum," Anya exclaimed passionately, breaking a *shanga* and tucking into it with great gusto, but not forgetting to kick her legs under the table and jiggle her elbows. "You're the cleverest mum of the lot," she said flatteringly, but also affectionately.

"You be quiet. Let's see what they're like first..."

"Do not eat soft or hot bread, but let it stand overnight. For it causes many diseases of the stomach," I suddenly recalled for some reason, then stopped short with a guilty smile, embarrassed by what I had said. It sounded as if I was criticising the cook and her food. Nastasia sat there outwardly thoughtful, but from her distracted look and vague smile I could sense the inner fever that was tormenting and alarming her.

"What was that you said, Timofei Ilyich?" Nastasia came down to earth. "Anya, be a good girl, for goodness sake. Let's have a nice quiet sit-down today at least."

"It's true what they write. Dough is thick. The heat

doesn't go right through it. The heaviness stays in the middle for a long time. But in the way we cook the crust is thin and it is fried at a steady heat in oil—that's a great advantage. If you stuff yourself with hot *shangas*, you walk around for the rest of the day as if you're in the bathhouse. The heat keeps streaming out of you," said Serafima serenely, all buttery and radiant. "Where are you, Grandad," she cried suddenly. "Gone on hunger strike, have you?"

"Grandad's had too much wine," sniggered Anya, probably copying the grown-ups. "He's got a hangover."

"Fancy talking such nonsense, a big girl like you," I tried to make Anya show some respect for her grandfather. But the *shangas* must have made my voice oily and contented too. "You were so tiny the stork could hardly find you under the gooseberry bush, when it brought you to Mummy. Perhaps she shouldn't have taken you."

"That's not true. I wasn't brought by a stork and I wasn't found under a gooseberry bush. I'll be a mother one day," Anya replied, staring hard to see if I was making fun of her. "You're the one with the crafty eyes. The stork must have brought *you*. I've got sad eyes, and I came out of Mum's tummy."

"Out of her tummy?" I acted the grown-up's part, catching Nastasia's eye and winking hesitantly at her. "But your mother hasn't got a tummy."

"She had one when she had me. Didn't she?"

"Spare us the details. That's enough," Nastasia tried to stop her.

"Weren't you bored in there?"

"Oo, yes. Bored stiff. It was dark and lonely, and I was so angry I kicked Mum's tummy. Didn't I, Mum?"

"Stop that nonsense! Leave the table at once!" Nastasia's face darkened. Her daughter jumped down and slammed the door, crying in a piercing, tearful voice. "What are you punishing me for? Help me, Grandad! They're getting at me. They won't leave me alone. Stuffing themselves with *shangas*, and driving me away just like a dog." The door flew open again and Chrysanth's large figure appeared. He was stroking his bristly chin, and behind him, unable to conceal a broad grin, peeped Anya.

"She'll be the death of me," Nastasia whispered.

Serafima came to and suddenly asked in the darkness that surrounded her: "Are you there, Timosha?" I said that I was. "So they've closed down the school, have they? There's no one to have kids anymore, did you say? I went there in twenty-three, when I was sixteen years old. I dreamed about myself today. I was three years old, with little bows, sitting on a bentwood chair, and on my lap was a silver tray with a fish, a big salmon. Fish are a bad omen, aren't they? Three years old, I was. Where could I have got that from, if I hadn't remembered it? Not long ago I dreamed about myself at the age of one, no, six months. Mother had swaddled me and taken me to a strange house. Suddenly they lit the lights and it blinded me, and I burst out crying ever so bitterly. There were lots of girls round me, and they all laughed."

"...You won't believe it, but I was the very first schoolteacher in Vazitsa. The school was in the tiny building opposite the priest's house. All the children were in one room. One winter we were all sitting there, when a terrible blizzard buried the building in the snow. We couldn't get out and we were shrieking our heads off. Luckily the woman came for the straw. We all shouted to her together, and she dug us out.

"...When I was leaving my father said to me: 'Nobody would go where you're going, Serafima, it's the back of beyond'. But instead of crying I laughed at what he said. I would have jumped into the arms of the devil to get away from home. My step-mother hated me and my old grandmother was bedridden. There was no one to take pity on me. I was all lost and lonesome, like a button that's fallen off a coat. One day I decided to hang myself. I climbed up and fixed the rope, but then I hadn't got the courage and I burst into tears: "Oh, why did mother leave me all alone." Luckily for me, my godfather came along and heard someone crying in the dark. He struck a match, saw the rope, took me with him, and gave my father and step-mother a thrashing. He had a terrible temper. Everyone was afraid of him... So I had less than seven years at school, then a month's teacher training course, and off I went to Vazitsa. Once I was there I never thought about home... not once... We really enjoyed ourselves in those days.

We used to think up all sorts of things to do. I used to hide something in a haystack, then, draw maps, and overnight everything got covered with snow. Then I gave the maps to the children and told them to hunt for it. One day the girls decided to play a trick and roped me in too. We pulled the wood off the bonfire and ran home giggling, but the chairman of the village Soviet heard us and came out with a lantern. I couldn't run very fast in my deerskin coat, and I was out of breath. The girls ran away, but he caught me, stuck me head foremost in the snow and stuffed snow into my coat. I hardly managed to crawl home. The girls split their sides with laughing, but I was in tears. I had to go to the village Soviet next morning on school business, and I felt so ashamed. I'll never forget it." Serafima gazed dreamily at the ceiling, chewing her lips, happy to be back in that remote, vanished life, and giggled suddenly, probably at the memory of that Christmas evening and the fear she had felt when the chairman planted her head foremost in the snow and stuffed snow down her coat. And people didn't often wear pants in those days. Ee, what a laugh! Serafima started cackling again, slapping her shrivelled hips, but Chrysanth frowned, looking sternly at his wife as if she was embarrassing him in front of a guest, and burst out:

"It's true what they say. Them that's born stupid can't be made clever," and also gave a gloomy guffaw. Serafima stopped at once, curling up offendedly and exclaiming in a shrill voice:

"You're just a smelly old goat."

"Smelly I may be, but we've slept side by side for forty-nine years, so there!" the old man announced triumphantly, surveying the table with equal pride.

"What a fool I was, what a fool! If only I'd known..."

"That's what I say, too. Now you've said it yourself," Chrysanth mumbled, not angrily or at a loss for words. In spite of a certain thickness he spoke weightily, which particularly annoyed his wife.

"That's enough, you two," Nastasia interrupted, not wanting an argument. She had quickly finished all her jobs and now, still hot from the stove and all the bustling about, she sat down next to her mother, put an arm affectionately round her shoulders and drew her closer, not

forgetting to inspect the table carefully to make sure that she had not forgotten anything, for she had tried so hard to please her parents. "That's enough, Mummy," she repeated dolefully. This morning she had so wanted to sit peacefully at the table for a long time, without all the rushing about and clever talk, to drink tea in a sedate and leisurely fashion by the simmering samovar, to give herself up to this simple comfort, to feel nothing but affection for those sitting by her, and not to want or think of anything else. But it's true what they say: man proposes, God disposes. Some evil spirit brought a visitor to the house before Nastasia had even finished her first cup, when she was just beginning to relax. And an unexpected guest is worse than a Tartar, as they say. You don't know how to behave, or where to put them so as to get rid of them quickly and you pray to goodness that they won't sit around for hours.

From Serafima's reaction and sour expression on her face, I realised that this visitor was poison to her. The old woman was so annoyed that she stared hard at the table and could not bring herself to utter a word of welcome. But Chrysanth came to life. His enamel eyes began to shine, and the old man got so excited that he even tossed his grey curls that had not been combed for ages. "How about a nice cup of tea, Shura?" he kept saying, dragging up a stool, trying to find the most comfortable position for it at the table, and flicking off some imaginary dust. "Tea in the morning? I don't drink tea at this hour," the visitor refused. She was a well-built, portly woman with a fresh ruddy face, the nose buried between the plump cheeks. Not a frail, limp creature (there are some so transparent, that you can even see their heart beating weakly) but one of those voracious women who like having a good time, who don't seem to get burnt out from their constant body heat over the years, and whose age you can only guess at, often mistakenly, from their six-monthly perms and faint web of wrinkles.

Shura was Serafima's sister-in-law, the wife of her brother Anton, and people said all sorts of things about her in Sloboda, including some that they should have been ashamed to say (but it's easy enough to start rumours and blacken a person's name, who's to say what's true and what isn't. One thing was that she had got her claws into

Anton with the help of a sorcerer from Kuchema ten years ago. The widowed Shura had visited the sorcerer to bemoan her fate and her unrequited love. And the sorcerer had made Anton infatuated with Shura in return for a hay stack of six sheaves, so desperately that the man left his wife and six children for the widow and her three. The six that he had abandoned grew up quietly, got on with their studies, and some of them found good jobs. One day Anton went to Arkhangelsk to see them when they all got together, a well-educated, good-looking lot, for their mother's name-day, and when the celebrations were over they told him not to come again. He wasn't a father to them any more and they did not want to know him. "Ee, the cruel lot, but they're right, you know," Anton would say about this visit and he usually cried or sometimes even fainted. Nor did he find any warmth and security with his new family. The passion was soon spent, the burnt leaves and embers scattered by the wind, and all that remained was the charred spot where the fire had burnt, but that was soon overgrown by weeds. They did not have any new children, and the ones from Shura's first marriage went astray quickly and easily. They took to drink, showed no desire to study, and then disappeared without sight or sound. Shura suddenly started drinking and flirting around with men even worse than before, but she never got ill and the drink did not age her. She only seemed to grow plumper on it and become smoother and glossier. Many a time in winter Anton had found her drunk in the street, thrown her like a sack of flour onto a sledge and pulled her home. "Let her freeze to death, why should you worry?" Serafima used to say to him, but Anton only said sadly that he had committed an unforgivable sin through the weakness of his heart by abandoning his six children, his own kith and kin, and God had punished him for it by making him suffer and he, Anton, would have to pay the price for the rest of his days...

Shura leaned against the wall, stroking her broad hips under the light blue crêpe de chine, caressing her bosom and swaying slightly, her sleepy languorous eyes resting on me as if by chance. Chrysanth was wriggling about on his chair. He had completely forgotten about the tea and the company, and was behaving shamelessly, trying

to catch Shura's eye, but she took no notice of him whatever.

"You know what," she cried, suddenly remembering something. "On the way here I met Anya playing in the street and she said to me: 'You're a tart, Shura.'" She tried to laugh, but gasped and stopped, obviously short of breath. So perhaps her good times were numbered after all. "I grabbed hold of her, the little devil. She looks all pale and weak and thin as a rake, but she's a real little devil, tough as nails. I couldn't get the better of her.. Children these days, Chrysanth Alexeyevich. Look what a granddaughter you've got! She knows all the choicest expressions. Ee, the little horrors," she heaved a feigned or perhaps sincere sigh, forgetting about romance for a moment, and her last words were full of sorrow. She must have suddenly remembered her sons. "We sacrifice everything for them, and what do they do? You don't want a lot, one child is enough but you must have a child. Life's not interesting without the little devils. I'll tell you why I've come. Has anyone seen my Anton? He's vanished into thin air." And for the first time she gave a meaningful glance at Chrysanth, and a lascivious, inviting look flashed in her eyes as if to say "Get a move on, old boy, grab it while you can, while the master's not around. He won't let you out of his sight most of the time, but today he's disappeared." She laughed again and walked lazily to the door, leaving a smell of sweat behind her.

"Why didn't you go running after the bitch? What's keeping you?" asked Serafima quietly. As if fearing her husband's sudden anger, she retired quickly to her corner behind the blue door, disappeared from view and lit a cigarette quickly.

"Get along, you silly cabbage. What've you hidden away for. Go and hold an inquest. Blast you," spat Chrysanth. But before the two of them could start rowing again, another visitor appeared. As I discovered shortly, it was Anton who had been looking for his wife all morning.

"Haven't seen my old girl, have you?" he asked from the doorway, turning round ready to slip back into the lobby.

"Is that you, brother? Yes, she's just gone. The bitch's smell is still here," Serafima replied, staring blindly through the kitchen door. "Have a cup of tea, love, and

cool down... Oh, you men, the women you take up with!"

"Mind your own business," Chrysanth retorted. Her brother said nothing, just stood in the doorway, leaning sideways against it, feet apart, looking nervy and anxious. On his haggard weatherbeaten face of a man with a stomach ulcer only one ash-coloured eye shone affectionately. The other was clouded with a white film, irregular and not properly covered by the eye-lid. Anton always tried to stand sideways showing the healthy side of his face and was forever jerking his head as if it was sewn on. That was the after-effects of shell-shock in the war.

"Feel like coming fishing?" Anton asked affectionately, not looking at Chrysanth and waving his hand in a mannered, feminine way.

"Not with you, I don't, thanks very much," Chrysanth replied venomously, alluding to the time when his brother-in-law had invited him to go perch fishing and then let him down. "I've already had a taste of that, comrade. I've forgotten what fish smells like."

"If you're not up to it, don't take it on, that's what I say. But I never go short of fish and meat," Anton boasted. "Still got two tubs of last year's and two barrels of spring pike... Last May I killed two cranes and plucked them. Shura, my old girl, put them into the stove to scorch them and could hardly pull them out again. They were real bigguns, they were."

"That's a load of codswallop." Chrysanth winked at me, inviting me to marvel at such blatant lying. "He's never used a gun in his life, and just listen to him," the old man teased his brother-in-law, winking at me all the time and smiling broadly. "He went hunting with a licence to kill moose, and shot a horse instead, Timofei Ilyich. Didn't you, eh?" Chrysanth bullied his brother-in-law to own up.

"Aye, that did happen to me once, but what is there to laugh about? It was a mistake, that's all," Anton said miserably, shifting about guiltily at the door, waving his hand and looking up shyly with his good eye.

"Well, tell our guest about it. He'll find it interesting."

"What's interesting about it... Well, I'd gone out to hunt moose, all above board. I saw something dark in the bushes, so I fired and hit it. Then I saw it was

a horse that had collapsed in its shafts. 'Oh, my goodness,' I thinks, 'let's put it out of its misery.' So I went for it with my knife, and then I saw its owner coming at me with an axe. The snow was deep, so I dived for his legs and brought him down. That saved the situation. Well, then I paid fifty rubles for the horse and twenty for the licence... It could happen to anyone. But you want to make me look a fool in front of a guest, Chrysanth Alexeyevich. Judging by the highest standards I'm not on the same level as you, of course. I'm not trying to show off as a hunter and woodsman. But I've never killed someone else's deer on the sly like you, and never stolen, nor have I put my boots on back to front to confuse the tracks."

"Ee, he's a crafty one and he can talk toothless old me under the table." Chrysanth turned away frowning and began to mumble indistinctly, as if he had lost his tongue. His spirits fell and he shook his grey curls over his eyes. Only their daughter Nastasia was unexpectedly quiet today, her dark-complexioned face with the high cheekbones radiating goodness. Anton waved his hand in a clumsy farewell and slipped sideways into the lobby. When his footsteps had died away and silence descended on the kitchen for the first time that morning, Nastasia suddenly suggested going for a bathe in the river.

"Put on your new dress, Mum," she said. "I'll dress you up like a dolly, bathe you in the river and wash your hair, 'cause you look like a little grey mouse." And for the first time she threw back her head and I heard her laugh, freely, infectiously, but also sadly. "Perhaps you'll come too, Chrysanth?" Serafima asked timidly, trying to stroke her husband's chest. "Let's all go together, eh? Timofei Ilyich, too, that'll be nice."

"Not me... Are you crazy?" Chrysanth waved his hands in alarm. "That's not for the likes of me."

Serafima wilted miserably, her mouth drooping. She disappeared into the bedroom, and, tired of waiting for her daughter, started rummaging blindly for a long time in a large carved trunk, with a spring top and a key that was stuck in the lock, flinging old-fashioned jackets and dresses now far too big for her onto the floor, until she found a pink dress smelling of mothballs. "He'll get drunk and run off to that bitch. We're going out now,

That's just what he's waiting for, the devil," she muttered, on the verge of tears. I happened to be by the window and stood there silently, afraid of walking away in case I betrayed my presence. I listened to her jealous mutterings, but for some reason I felt sorry for both of them.

The river shone with silver and sang in the sun. It appeared suddenly, entering me at once, enthralling and blinding me. All everyday cares receded, and I seemed to return to my childhood. At the sight of the river even the most hard-hearted person will feel an involuntary sadness at first, then a painful yearning that suddenly wells up in his throat as a wild joy. Such is the power of open stretches of water.

I quickly discarded my clothes, like an old skin, wondering how I had lived for so many days by the flowing water without visiting it, without plunging down to the shimmering bed alive with dimly flickering shadows.

Looking round I saw Nastasia undress with the same intoxicating haste, throwing down striped skirt like a worthless rag and flinging her jumper after it. Serafima folded her pink house-dress into a tidy parcel and stood in a long linen undergarment that came down to her feet and tied under her neck with ribbons, with creases where it had been folded. She looked like the Virgin Mary or an Old Believer before the ritual washing-down of the dead body. The light streaming over the vaults of the heat-filled crystal chalice washed and gilded her snow-white head. Only Anya took no notice of what was going on. She slipped into the water like a fish, and in a flash her sharp, inquisitive face was carried along by the current. After issuing the usual warning, her mother entered the water hurriedly and lowered herself into it, gasping fearfully. Then she called to Serafima, but without waiting for her went out onto the bank and joyfully abandoned her chocolate-coloured, shining body to the sun... The old woman had probably not heard the call. Perhaps she could see through her blindness, as through a clouded glass, the dim bar of sunlight and below it the long scaly snake, barely outlined in space, which was the river. The snake hissed and rose on its tail, and Serafima felt that she had only to stretch out her leg to feel the slippery, cold flesh. But then laughter destroyed her vision and the splash of water. Serafima sensed the warm

smell of rotting from the sand-bank and a faint odour of fish. Enveloped by the scent of clover, particularly pungent on the bank, the old woman walked boldly into the water as if enthralled. The warm shallow water seized the wooden, frozen feet and scorched Serafima right up to her throat. The old woman shuddered and her eyes began to water.

A slight wave caught her hem, stuck the white linen to the withered ankles, and drew the old woman into it, into the greedy, tickling depth. Serafima suddenly felt afraid of something, visions, perhaps, cried out tremulously and turned back, stumbling in the sand. "What's the matter, Mum?" Nastasia hugged her. "Come on, I'll give you a bath. I'll wash you and comb your hair, like a doll. I bet you've forgotten when you last bathed in the river." "I live by the river and never bathe in it," Serafima confessed, following her daughter obediently. They walked hand in hand, and from the back the old mother looked like her daughter's daughter... What a strange thing time is! It has no real face. It is a kind of dream, magic, miracle, a strange and terrible game with man. It is all around us, we live in it, like fish in water, yet we cannot touch it, cannot stare and discern ourselves in it. For the hands on the clock or the passage of the heavenly bodies over the sky, by which we determine only our own movement, are but consolation for our imagination, so that it does not give way to utter despair. But whence does time come and whither does it go? Who can say?

...They went into the river. The iridescent light blurred all forms, and at a distance Serafima was again her daughter's daughter. It is remarkable how unabashed and natural old people and small children are in their nakedness. They do not worry about inquisitive stares, as if their tender skin had hardened over the years and turned into a shell, and their soul become so simple that it had returned to its primordial state, free of dirt and sin. Thus did Serafima, unembarrassed by me, discard her long shift, throw it to her daughter, dip down and exclaim loudly. Then she began to splash handfuls of water over herself and laugh happily, her worn-out heart choking, as if someone were tickling her. Nastasia pleaded lovingly with her mother, as if she was a child, soaping her all over from head to foot, then washing her thin

body patiently and compassionately. After that she covered her with the long, linen shift, which had now dried, only did not tie the ribbons under her neck, so that some heat from the heavens would descend on the shrivelled breasts that had fed so many children, bringing warmth and life albeit for a short while. Propriety demanded that I turn away from this washing, for it is embarrassing and awkward to see someone naked, especially an old woman, but almost against my will I watched with interest, and suddenly caught myself thinking that everything carnal had vanished, melted away in the golden air and was now seen as if on a canvas cracked with age where everything that takes place in the picture is still magically alive today, although in fact it has already receded so far away in time and so irrevocably, that now it is nothing more than a trick, a delusion, a dream...

After seeing to her mother, Nastasia dragged her daughter out of the water almost by force, and the latter buried herself in the hot white sand, with only her thin, animal-like face sticking out and watching us inquisitively. "Granddaughter, where are you? Ee, but it's grand here!" Serafima almost sobbed. Getting no response from the tired and silent Anya, she forgot about her and settled down comfortably. Stretching out her thin legs, heels together, lifting her shift over her knees and rubbing them as if to relieve the pain in them, she addressed us, or the sky or herself with a prayerlike "Oh, Lord, how grand it is!" Then sang in a slightly quivering voice, drawing out the words:

*The morn breaks forth, the waters flame*
*And o'er the lake a gull doth skim*
*And in that free expanse so broad*
*A ray of sunlight gilds her wing.*

Suddenly she broke off, stopping short as if something had triggered her memory, surprised and amazed her. "Can it really be true, my angels? That I used to play here as a child, then never came again? My sight has gone, but I can see everything better than before... Wring out your pants, daughter, it's not good to have wet pants, you might catch cold...

*A careless hunter wounds the bird*
*And she dies, quivering in the reeds.*

I used to play here as a child, but I haven't been down to the river since then. Ee, but it's a terrible thing to lose your sight! Worse than going out of your mind. This is my second year of blindness, and it's like being dead. What Aunt Manya must have suffered, if she was blind for twenty years. It's like being in a dungeon, like being buried alive... Change Anya's pants, Nastasia, hear me? And don't let her into the river again. She's a devil for the water, she is. Ee, but it's grand, lads and lassies." Serafima gave a shrill laugh, happy as a sandboy.

"I've done everything, don't worry," Nastasia retorted briefly, not stirring, for she had long been oblivious to everyone. She was lying on her back, gazing up into the sky, but her thoughts were delving into herself. Even here, in the fresh air, by the edge of her beloved river a strange restlessness possessed her, and from the vacant way she glanced at me, I realised that she was miles away.

"I made up a fairy story last night," Nastasia suddenly confessed, gazing at the sky. "I dreamed it... Without people, without life, just a story. I seemed to be making it up all night and I got very tired, but when I woke I could remember everything. It was a very long one. I tried to remember it just now, but it suddenly got shorter... Not a day had passed, but it was shorter."

"I once played the concertina in a dream..."

"That's nothing, this was different," Nastasia interrupted rudely, turning away quickly, her back tense and her shoulders shaking, as if she were weeping inconsolably out of pity for herself.

"I'm sorry, forgive me," I apologised, overcoming my bewilderment, and even stretched out a hand to touch her shoulder. I wanted desperately to take Nastasia into my arms, to fondle the sad, drooping neck, the plump shoulders, now covered with perspiration, and the small of her back, touched with fine fair hair. I was so happy to be with this woman that I almost gasped with delight. I was afraid of a clumsy word, and even more of an anxious and tremulous silence. "Begin and then your story will come back."

"It was a strange dream without people or nature or me. Only my voice seemed to be repeating everyting after itself." Nastasia began in a hollow, hesitant voice. "Anyway, once upon a time misfortune befell the people

of a certain land. They began to perish from strife and hunger. No, not from strife," she corrected herself and began to narrate in a dull, even monotone. "They did not perish from strife, but all lived apart from one another, separated by fences, and were afraid of one another, afraid of going outside. They went out to hunt at night and could not kill anyone in the dark, of course. It sounds confused, but in my head it's quite different ... beautiful... Then a very good and kind old man had a dream. God caused a whale to be cast up on the shore, and if the people agreed to live in harmony and share everything like brothers, the whale meat would last for a long time, perhaps forever. The old man was amazed by this dream, and early in the morning he ran to the beach and saw a whale lying there, a huge one, lashing its tail. The old man began to run round the houses, but the people did not believe him and bolted their doors. He ran round the village for a whole day, then another, and on the third day he went back to the beach, but the whale had gone. The people were so hungry they came down to the beach. The old man was sitting there, but there was not a trace of the whale. So the men killed the old man because they thought he had deceived them. He told them it was their own fault, because they had lacked trust. They killed the old man and went back to their houses. And stayed there for a day, then another, but on the third day they went to the beach and began to argue about who had killed the old man, for each of them was guilty, and so again... But that's not the point. I wonder why they killed him? He was trying to do good, he wasn't deceiving them. It was their lack of trust that destroyed them, wasn't it? Their lack of trust deceived them."

"He did not arouse their love. He just joined their separate fears into a common fear."

"Well, how do you arouse love in a person?"

"Does love exist at all? That's the question. It's so doubtful that goodness only knows," I said with an unexpected ferocity and hostility.

My tone obviously angered and offended Nastasia. Her face turned pale and sharp, and she suddenly burst out shrilly, her eyes full of hatred.

"Who says it doesn't exist? If love doesn't exist, what will happen to them, the children? We live by love."

Nastasia was ready to join battle.

"That's egoism and self-deception," I could not stop myself from saying. An evil spirit was in possession of me and, sensing this, I went cold inside. I no longer felt my recent attraction to Nastasia, which had verged on adoration, and suddenly noticed with a strange feeling of distaste that the eyes were set too far apart and surrounded with a mass of early wrinkles, the nose was too flat, the lips were turned down and blue at the corners, probably from the heat, and the heavy hair was already flecked with grey. From what black depths did this morbid curiosity arise in me? Was this darkness forever lurking inside me?

Nastasia was confused and looked round. Her daughter was drowsing, eyelashes drooping, and Serafima was still sitting with legs outstretched, busily patting the sand around her. She was gazing at the sun, and its dull light seemed to pierce her to the very core, enveloping her heart to leave its imprint there for a long time, until darkness clouded her gaze completely. Further off, beside the melting river that seemed to have stopped and lay shimmering within its bounds, stretched the ripening meadows and above the panicled grass rose a cranberry-coloured hill with a long row of sun-drenched houses and a windmill that looked like a belfry. Occasional fluffy clouds drifted over the sky beyond the river, casting transparent shadows on the silky banks.

She turned her gaze to me, and it was unexpectedly pitying and keen, as if Nastasia had suddenly read my heart and divined the lonely meaning behind the hard shell of words. Then she spoke quietly, breathing gently and moving closer.

"Love does exist, I tell you. What's the point of living if it doesn't? Affection exists, love exists, children exist, and you and I exist." She stopped short and said almost tearfully: "Don't say that again, will you? I can't help thinking that we, women, are trying to do the wrong things these days. We want to impose our will. It's nothing but egoism. We want to influence things, we dream of making discoveries, getting on, pushing other people around. How nasty we've become, haven't we? The real womanly qualities have all been lost—quietness, fidelity, femininity. We're half-men now, we even walk

like men and our voices are hoarse from smoking. But our job is to love the man of our choice. That's what we were created for. And I ask you, what could be better than bearing him children, lots of children, bringing them up, washing shirts, cooking meals, in a cheerful, quiet, loving home... But today millions of women, instead of loving their family and bringing up their children—they don't like doing this because they have neither the time nor the inclination—rely on the laundry and the canteen and couldn't care less..."

I heard her, yet did not listen. The words reached me, but her sad murmuring voice enveloped me, and I was painfully jealous of the man she loved and caressed.

"But what if I have never been in love?" I suddenly confessed sadly and frankly, yet for some reason smiling as if to attribute a secret, insincere meaning to my words. For people do not usually believe the naked truth. They regard it as a trick, a passing mood. And there I was smiling stupidly.

"How can I believe a thing like that? You're a man." She looked at me so appraisingly that I felt embarrassed. She moved away a little, wandering aimlessly along the ebbing water's edge, the sun's rays playing on her, and I, alone once more, felt the sky envelop me in the dry noonday heat. Give me some birch branches and I would have beaten myself like people do at the baths, the day was so steaming hot. I hurried into the river. At first it cooled me, then embraced me tenderly and carried me along. But the bank attracted me again. It was lonely and miserable swimming on your own, and the water did not seem so inviting now. One obviously needs a calm, untroubled heart for everything... When I reached the bank, struggling against the current that was trying to sweep me off my feet, Nastasia had already collected some black, sweet-smelling roots and driftwood covered with mould and hard as stone, piled it up on the shore and was trying to set fire to it.

"I'll get it going with one match. I know what I'm doing," she anticipated my advice, hearing my breathing behind her back.

"Put the dry twigs first, and add the thicker branches later," I told her, but Nastasia merely shrugged her shoulder as if telling me to leave her alone and mind my

own business, and broke match after match as she struck them impatiently. "I know what I'm doing," she kept repeating, but her efforts were in vain, so she stood up, pretending that her back was aching.

"Why do you keep watching me like that?"

"Mind your own business."

"You're more like a woman than a real man," she exploded. "Don't you know what we should do? I'd have lit it at once if it hadn't been for you interfering." But she had used up the box of matches. Fortunately her mother had some, so I meekly set about lighting the bonfire, smiling to myself. But it had just begun to smoke and smell of damp driftwood drying on the flame, and the flames had not yet caught the thick branches, when she came with the kettle on a thick pronged stick. "I know what I'm doing," she repeated, but either she was in a hurry or her hot-headed disposition could not abide being watched, because she spilt the water. The fire, after flickering under the ash in its death trap, spluttered and went out, emitting a sweet aroma of burning in farewell. "You keep getting in the way. I'd have done it in a minute on my own," said Nastasia irritably.

But the fire caught in the end, its hot flame barely visible in the motionless burning air. Then the water boiled, bubbling like the head on a mug of beer, and the tea that Serafima longed for was left to brew. The old woman had not mentioned tea, but when it was ready and the hot mug was thrust into her hand, she said gratefully: "Ee, just what I wanted, lads. I was sitting here dreaming of a nice cup of tea. How did you guess, or did I wish so loud that you heard me?" And she cackled merrily, wiping her hands.

For thirty years, ever since Serafima had come back from Vazitsa, the river had flowed under her windows. Barges sailed along it, belching smoke and hovering seagulls swooped over it. Her grown-up children would run up from it with a hungry glean in their eyes. Her husband would bring fish from it. In the forest on the other side of the river there were said to be masses of mushrooms and berries. But in those thirty years the river had never once attracted Serafima, never urged her to pay her respects, and her heart had never languished in the silvery twilight at the sight of the full living stream

flecked with crimson. With all the worries, all the hustle and bustle of looking after ten children at home and a class at school, all the piles of exercise books, the river was put aside, as it were, for later on, for a special occasion. And now this joy had come suddenly as if from nowhere. River, river, flow on your way, bring delight to folk each day. But it turned out that the river had a soul, a quiet, sorrowful soul, only too willing to have a long confidential talk with the anguished and the loving. Serafima stopped short, stiff with presentiment, and thought she was probably going to die soon.

"But there is love, so there must be some kind of love," she said suddenly, trying to calm her troubled heart. "You can invent anything, but not love... It's live pepper and salt. You can manage without love, but you can't live without it. I've known three loves in my seventy years. There was a girl called Sara in Sloboda. She went to the school there. She was forever standing by the window and singing: 'Off with a gypsy band I'll fly.' Her father was a butcher. He killed her mother in a fit of jealousy. There were two sisters, and their grandmother brought them up. One day some gypsies arrived and she went off with a young fellow. They tried to catch her and bring her back, but they couldn't. Then the gypsies came to Vazitsa. She hid at Kona Petenburg's place, lying on the bench all the time, not showing her face. A few years later she came to Vazitsa again with the gypsy tribe. This time she had a child with her. People said the gypsies had bewitched her, but when they wanted to stop her from going away, she said she was going of her own free will, that it was love that made her leave her own kind. Then the next time she came with the tribe, we wanted to find out how she was getting on. I went to see her, and she dared not look me in the eye. Her husband turned out to be an old man. After the young gypsy she had been sold to the old man. When I came he was lying on the stove, miserable as sin. He jumped down and chased me away. Sara came into the lobby crying. 'I'm so unhappy', she whispered. 'They've sold me'. Afterwards they said she drowned in the lake. They took her away from the man she loved and sold her to an old man. But the fellow she loved was an ugly one too, with bandy legs. They must have bewitched her."

"I'm sorry for her," said Nastasia dreamily. "But that's a delusion, not love."

"Love is cruel, it lies in lover's eyes," chanted Serafima. "I remember how my father-in-law loved his wife Tatiana. That was a different matter. He would have washed her feet and drank the water." Serafima spoke now without her former liveliness, as if she were tired of the hot sun or could not find the right words...

"Chrysanth's mother was from Pizhma, a tall, strapping woman with red cheeks, a thick plait and never at a loss for words. She was left an orphan and came to Vazitsa in a little boat, but the folk there don't welcome strangers, they turned up their noses at her. She found a deserted bath house to live in, that was before I was born. Then she started going to a merchant's house to wash the floors and do the cooking. She was a good housewife and kept everything in order. She knew how to stick up for herself, but never said anything offensive. Alyosha Kren proposed to her. Well, he probably just took her to live with him. They lived in the forest, and he never lifted a finger against her. Never treated her badly. He used to go off hunting. He would go into the forest with some rusks and a pack of butter and stay there a long time, sometimes a month, living on bread and raw pike. Then he'd come home with the pack of butter and say 'A present from the fox for you, Tatiana.'

"He had a long, painful death. Just before the end he said: 'Forgive me for everything, Tatiana.' And his strongest curse when he got angry was: 'Ee, woman, what a woman ye are!'

"Chrysanth doesn't take after his father. I should say not... All the sons are a bit funny. I remember they didn't like sourcream. I was pregnant and there was a big bowl of sourcream on the table. I was spooning it up and teasing my husband: 'Ee, I feel like sourcream, it's going to be a boy.' Then he said, 'It's enough to make you throw up, Chrys. How can you sleep with a woman who eats sourcream?' So my old man put the bowl on the floor and called the dog. Then he got hold of me from behind so that I couldn't take the sourcream away. And went on holding me till the dog had licked it all up... No, you couldn't say he spoilt me.

"...And the third love was my own!" You know how I came to Vazitsa, but you don't know how I got Chrysanth. It was as if fate had meant him for me. Our paths crossed the very first day. At first he didn't seem anything special, but then I found myself thinking secretly all the time that there was someone I wouldn't mind taking up with. But at that time he was married to a Nenets girl. He lived in Upper Keli and didn't often come to Vazitsa. So that would have been that... But do you know when I realised that I was in love with Chrysanth? When he nearly perished at sea and there was no news of him for about three weeks. You love someone if you're afraid of losing him, and I've been afraid of losing him all my life, and still am..."

Maybe the sun was too much for the old woman or she was worrying about her house which we could see from the river, nestling in a green haze of bird cherry, where her husband had stayed. She did not know whether he was still there or what he was doing, he was that sort of man. She lived for Chrysanth, hating and loving him, and what's in the head is on the tongue, too. Serafima had already forgotten what she had said earlier, even what she had remembered yesterday. The words did not remain for long in her foggy head. They drifted away like the mist, which made the old woman repeat herself often with great force, as if she had just remembered something interesting and unusual, although no one had asked to share her memories and innermost thoughts. But words uttered fifty years and more ago would suddenly flare up so brightly and vividly that Serafima was somewhat alarmed for herself. Today she had suddenly dreamed that she was three years old, sitting in an armchair with her legs stretched out, wearing green goatskin boots and a black velvet dress with white lace round the hem and with lots of frills, stitching and flounces, such a pretty dress, and on her lap she had a silver tray with a salmon that had live, snake-like eyes and a tail that reached down to the floor and it kept swishing the tail quietly, sweeping up the rubbish. Suddenly her mother appeared, also very young, and shouted something fearfully to Serafima, that she didn't understand, and kept pointing to the tray, but instead of the salmon a disgusting black monster was spread all over it. What a thing to dream! Did it mean illness, or

something worse? Serafima had wondered in the morning. Then the dream had been forgotten, replaced by a joy long unknown, but now she had been in the sun too long and that was probably why the dream had returned...

Serafima had gone blind two years ago. They said it was her liver because she had twice suffered badly from jaundice, Botkin's disease. But it had been very unexpected. One day she had been healthy and could see alright, or at least that was how it had seemed then and how she remembered it now. Then the next moment her sight had gone. One night she had bad toothache. She made a loop in a piece of cotton, put it over her tooth, the one and only help and mainstay in her toothless mouth, her only molar, which she cherished more than life itself and which enabled her to still taste her food properly. But then it began to ache and swell up, the wretched thing, and the pain was excruciating. Chrysanth was groaning drunkenly in his sleep. He couldn't care less about the old woman. Serafima could bear it no longer. Realising that she could not hold out until the morning, she hooked the thread onto the tooth, tied it to the door handle and slammed the door. The tooth did not come out, and she dared not try a second time. She managed to get through the night somehow and set off for the hospital in the morning. But the pain was so great that the old woman went in the wrong direction and was five kilometres away from Sloboda before she realised it. She went all the way back on foot and eventually reached the hospital, which was closed on that day. She sat down in the doorway, announcing that she would not go away until they pulled the tooth out. They ran to fetch the doctor. Fortunately she lived next door. One tug with the forceps and out came the tooth. Serafima began to bleed heavily. They stopped the bleeding. Serafima burst out laughing. The pain had vanished. She laughed for a bit, paid her respects, went outside and darkness descended on her eyes. As if stearin had been poured over a candle and there was no air for the flame, so it faded away until it went out altogether in a pool of wax. This is what happened to Serafima. But the doctors said it was her liver that had taken away her sight.

But there was a story behind that too. The school in Vazitsa was opened in nineteen-twenty-three and Serafima

was sent to teach there. They set off from Zimnyaya Zolotitsa in a small boat. The men were carrying sacks of grain and groats, everything they had earned in Arkhangelsk, and Serafima had her rations, all her food. Suddenly the boat was overtaken by a storm and capsized in the shallows near the shore. The men managed to swim ashore, but they forgot all about the girl in the confusion when each wave could be the last. Only a lad of seventeen remained, clinging to the keel for dear life. Suddenly through the watery spray that enveloped everything he saw some tresses of hair rise up on the crest of a wave in front of him. He grabbed the hair, saw the unconscious girl, and set off for the shore with her on a breaker. Later, when he was remembering this day in his cups, Chrysanth would exclaim angrily that if he'd known he would have cut off his arm rather than save the hussy. "I looked and saw this hair floating on the water," he would say. "That's funny, I thought. So I grabbed it, and there was the old girl. That's how I found this treasure, this yoke round my neck, shiver my timbers."

On the shore the men began to shake and pummel her. She barely regained consciousness and for a long time could not make out what had happened. There was a lump in her throat, she could not breathe, her eyes were glazed, her hair was tangled, and her whole body was scratched and battered. She seemed to come to, but then she stopped breathing. She wanted to say: "Don't torment me, leave me alone and let me die." Then one of the men went behind a rock and started singing a dirty ditty: 'They're not berries, not a bit, that's a pile of Mishka's shit.' Serafima heard this and thought it was funny. She tried to laugh or wanted to laugh, but hiccupped instead which made the cork pop out of her throat and released the rest of the water. She was terribly thirsty, but the men would not let her drink. They only moistened her lips with a rag soaked in spring water.

Afterwards Alexei Kren, Chrysanth's father, who was in charge of the boat, said: "Well, Serafima, you've been saved from drowning, but if you live that long you'll curse us in your old age, because we thrashed and pummelled you to stop you dying." (He turned out to be right and she always remembered his words). They warmed themselves for a while by the fire, then decided to

go to the chapel on the shore and give thanks. "If you don't come with us, lass, there's no more sailing with us either," Kren said to Serafima. What else could she do, stranded on a deserted shore without a bite to eat, for everything she had was at the bottom of the sea now. Serafima agreed, although she was a Young Komsomol member and did not believe in God. She was taken to the chapel and prayed as best she could with the men. They wept bitter tears, because they had lost all their food, the fruit of their hard labour, and those were hungry times. All the cats and dogs in Vazitsa were eaten. Serafima could not stop herself from bursting into tears. She thought of her dear departed mother, her life as an orphan that had known hardship so early, and the unknown future.

Serafima's rations (a sack of flour) were lost in the shipwreck, and she was fed in the village, like a shepherd, by a different family each day. She would go to a house, sit down at the table and eat what she was offered, sometimes waiting a long time on the threshold if she came at the wrong moment, and this pained the young schoolmistress greatly and made her writhe inwardly. She found it particularly painful when she came to a poor widowed family where even the poorest quality bread was regarded as a blessing and where the children watched hungrily as she ate. Realising that she was eating food they could ill afford to give, Serafima would leave the table hastily and thank them kindly, suppressing the tear within her. But however strict they were with the schoolmistress, who was still a young girl and should have been flouncing her petticoats at parties at that age, she managed to survive. They did not let her die, although things were very hard for them too. They did not let her die, sharing their last crust of bread with her, their last loaf made of flour mixed with moss.

There was tobacco at the depot allocated for the Soviet employees, the teacher and the doctor. The fishermen were fishing for salmon. They were paid in fish, not money. They not only wanted bread, but were dying for a drag on a cigarette made with real tobacco instead of the dry moss that they moodily rolled into "goats' feet". One day the men asked the teacher to get them some *makhorka*, the rough tobacco that makes the blood run faster in your veins. Serafima went to the

depot manager and said that she smoked. He gave her a home-made cigarette and watched to see what she would do with it. She turned away, puffing like a samovar and saying how good it was and how she hadn't had a proper smoke for ages. Her throat burned and she felt dizzy. After that she got her allowance of *makhorka* regularly and gave some to the fishermen in return for fish, but gradually she developed the passion for smoking that stayed with her all her life...

"...And I didn't forget my saviour. Curly-headed, blue-eyed, tall and strapping. His reflection stuck in my heart like a splinter. He was already married. His wife was a Nenets girl, but the news soon spread that she had fallen overboard and drowned while they were out fishing in the lake. People had their own ideas about that, of course. There were only the two of them, so who could say. Chrysanth told his father-in law that his daughter had drowned, but who knows for certain? After that he started coming to Vazitsa. It was a long way, but he would do the journey in his boat. One day there was a show at the club and some drunken lads came in, sons of the more well-to-do. They put out the kerosene lamps and started brawling, throwing their weight around, and the benches soon went flying... I was afraid and tried to climb out of a window, but my skirt was made of leather and it got caught on a nail, so I was left hanging there. I kept trying to get off, but it was no good. The blood rushed to my head, "What a death to die!" I thought to myself. "I didn't manage to drown, so now I'm going to choke!" I felt ashamed, as if I'd been hung up to dry, and my skirt was falling over my head. Then a lad came running to join in the brawl and I called out to him. (What strong material that was, eh? Material was strong in those days). Well, the lad unhooked me and carried me off in his arms. I thought he was up to no good, he would do something bad to me. He was carrying me like a kid glove. I was just going to grab his hair when I saw it was my Chrys. So I lay back in his arms all of a tizzy and didn't want to get down. But he stood me on my feet, slapped my behind, and went off without a word. I was upset that he didn't take any notice of me, so I fell down on purpose, pretending I'd hurt myself and lay there, moaning. Chrysanth came back and asked me what was the matter,

I kept on wincing and groaning. So he picked me up again and carried me home, as soon as he saw who I was, he started pestering me and using his hands. 'You owe me something,' he said, 'pay back your old debt to me for rescuing you. This is the second time I've saved your life.' I smacked his hands, but that didn't stop him, so I gave him a slap on the cheek, only a light one, for appearance sake. I couldn't sleep with him just like that, could I? But he got all worked up and rushed away. I cried as if it was the end of the world... But soon afterwards I heard that lots of Nenets had come to Upper Keli, three hunting families, and the authorities wanted to set up a school there now that there were enough children. So I got myself transferred there, and then things went as I wanted. There wasn't much competition, and anyway I was a pretty, trim lass then, wasn't I? There aren't any bad lasses, all young lasses are worth having. Then the children started to come. He used to go off hunting in the forest. I was as slim as a wine glass then. Fancy a drop, hee, hee."

"Towards spring he would come back from the forest and there was already a bairn in the cradle. Another bun in the oven. I was a bonny lass with a gleam in my eye and my man knew what he was doing too. We had three lads and three lasses, and two that died. It wasn't the fashion then to get rid of them. Once you'd started a child, you let it see the light of day..."

We found Chrysanth as we had left him, sitting at the table. He did not turn in our direction, although we were making a noise, but planted his elbows on the table and went on admiring himself in a small glass frame. One day in the town they had taken a coloured photograph of him and put it in a blue, plastic ball, and now the flabby, grey-headed old man was gazing affectionately at himself when he was young, blonde and gallant. He had suddenly entered a different world, of the distant past. This photograph had been touched up a bit here and there, of course. They had to do something for their money, the devils, but if you thought about it he really had looked like that.

"Ee, what a good-looking fellow, eh?" Chrysanth said, sensing that we had come back. "How could the lasses help falling for him, eh? Look at those brows, the crooked nose, and the pouting lower lip. The handsome devil..."

"Who's that you're talking to, Grandad?" asked Serafima, glad to find the old man at home. Chrysanth shot his wife a dark glance, and continued, ignoring her.

" A real handsome devil ... fancy having a son like that. And then some ugly old hag goes and milks him dry. Just look what she turned him into, friends." Suddenly he shouted angrily: "What's the matter? Have you all dropped dead? You've been away long enough. The old man could have died or starved to death, while you were out enjoying yourselves. So she's been sunning herself, has she? Maybe she found herself a young 'un out there, eh? I've seen them hanging around there, the hairy lot. They're after something a bit fresher."

"Maybe I did, hee, hee. A nice hairy, black-headed young 'un," Serafima laughed again. "'You're a real darling, Fimochka,' he says. "Why didn't you kick the bucket, Grandad? I was walking along, thinking 'At last my old man's popped off, now I can live in peace and get myself any lover I want...' Why didn't you?"

"I'll outlive you," Chrysanth gave her a dull look. "The times I've been at death's door. That's enough for a hundred men."

"...The first time was when I nearly froze to death at the age of twelve. It was forty degrees under. Me and my father got lost and wandered around for three days. Then we came to the river. It was about six kilometres home from there. 'If I try to take you with me, boy, we're both finished,' my father said. 'I'll go and fetch a sledge and some of the lads, only whatever happens don't fall asleep. If you feel tired, crawl along, and if you can't crawl, roll along like a ball.. Only don't fall asleep.' And off he went, leaving me alone. I walked and walked, then stumbled and set down on a tree root. 'I'll have a rest,' I thought. So I lay my head on my arms and it felt so nice and cosy, as if I was in heaven. Then, thank goodness, my arm gave way and I fell face down into the snow and came to. But I couldn't stand up, my legs were already stiff. So I started rolling, like my father told me. I was at the end of my strength, about to give up the ghost, when I heard them coming. They took me home on a sledge. Mother filled a tub with hot water and

put me in it. I howled like a wild beast. It was my birthday. Guests came round in the evening. They drank beer and bawled songs, and there was I lying on the stove like a lump of wood, all burning, with the skin peeling off me. I moulted like a dog that time..."

"Aye, you moulted, but you didn't pop off. So don't boast about things like that, eh?" Serafima interrupted her husband. Nastasia quickly set the table. Chrysanth ate hastily and greedily, then went out without a word.

"He'll get drunk now and go to her, the bitch," Serafima said in a whisper. "You'd think he'd be ashamed because of Anton. After all he is his brother-in-law."

"Surely you're not jealous, Mother?" Nastasia laughed, stroking her head as if she were a child. "He's no use to anyone... You don't think Shurka's after him, I hope..."

"Ee, lass," sighed Serafima. "I feel all light and dizzy. I could flap my hands and fly away. It's as if there's air inside me, in all my bones... What if he takes up with someone else," she asked in alarm, her face clouding with fear. "What would I do without him, my darlings. I'm not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of losing him... Go and see what he's doing, lass. Run and find out where he's gone and let me know... No, never mind, blast him. It's no use tickling Satan's heels. Perhaps he really will live forever, touch wood... He had a narrow escape in thirty-six as well. He left Morzhevets Island to go seal hunting, got carried away by the current and was out at sea for thirteen days. Says he killed seals, drank their mothers' milk, ate the kidneys and managed to keep going. Those Krens have got spines made of iron. Anyone else would have given up the ghost long ago. All those days out at sea on the ice, without light or heat, eating raw meat like an animal. It was lucky he passed the lighthouse and they noticed him and sent out a boat. They saw a little speck on the ice looking like a man rushed to the rescue. But what if they hadn't seen him, if they'd missed him, what then... He said when he saw the boat he lost all his strength and fell down on the ice. They had to carry him ashore on a stretcher... And he was wounded three times in the war. Let him do as he likes," she gave a long sigh. "He'll get tired of it one day. But how long will he have to live before he's had enough. He'll soon be in his eighties..."

At this point a visitor arrived in a long sarafan with frills and blue ribbons along the hem, with a tall black hat on her head and rubber galoshes with woolen socks on her feet. She came into the room and bowed low, carrying a bowl covered with a cloth, which she placed silently on the edge of the table. Then she sat down on a stool by the doorway, and buried her brown hands in her skirt. Her face was placid with brown spots on the hollow cheeks and the same great calm and meekness in the grey, homely eyes. She saw Serafima listening hard to find out who had arrived so unexpectedly, and announced briefly: "It's me, Serafima Anatolievna... It's me, Sekleteya, I've brought you some cabbage pie. I made it today and thought I'd take a bit over to my dear sister. She's fond of cabbage pie." The visitor rose again, bowed from the waist, and sat down in the same place, pursing her lips sanctimoniously. "We've done our own baking today. We've got a visitor so we decided to do some baking today as well," Serafima declined. "Well, I'm not going to take it back now, whether you want it or not." "Oh, well, leave it then, my dear."

I had already guessed that Sekleteya was an Old Believer. It was interesting to look at her. I had always imagined them as rather rough, unfriendly people, lacking in intelligence and warmth, wrapped up in their faith which sets them apart from others. But they turned out to be very ordinary, down-to-earth people in their dress and appearance, probably so as not to stand out from others, not to stick out like a sore thumb, to be sober even in the colour of their clothing.

In recent years, Serafima said, they had started visiting her, bringing a pancake, a hot pie or some salted fish. She had no need of these offerings. She had a pension for her services at the highest rate, as well as two orders and five medals in her trunk on top of her funeral dress, which she had prepared in advance. But what Serafima did need was attention, a kindly word, a nice chat, and so she did not send the old women away. She had taught primary classes for forty-five years, but for some reason now, when she particularly wanted to be with people, no one came to see her, no one felt any sympathy for or interest in her new blind life. "It's like being thrown on the rubbish heap," she would sometimes grumble bitterly,

and immediately reproach herself for thinking such thoughts, certain that the district comrades responsible were too busy. In their hustle and bustle they had temporarily forgotten about their trusty companion of many years, a devoted Party member down to the very core. And so, having overcome her momentary weakness and repented of her uncharitable thoughts, she sang in a wavering voice: "We are blacksmiths, our hearts are young, and we're forging the keys of happiness..."

Serafima was greatly respected in Sloboda. She had set many on their life's path and given them direction. One day a woman who worked at the brick factory died. She had spent all her life in rubber boots and a blue canvas skirt, a war widow, an ordinary little woman with a sallow, smutty face. She was an Old Believer, but recently she had taken to drink, probably because things had got too much for her or perhaps she was just tired of living—that sometimes happens too. Her bladder burst and she died. The other Old Believers came to perform the rites for their sister in Christ, but her eldest daughter, a Komsomol member, would not let them into the house, and drove them away. So they went to see Serafima and meekly asked her to have a word with the girl. "She was taught by you, she loves you and will listen to your word alone. The dead woman is one of our faith. If we do not perform the rites we shall be committing a mortal sin, and her departed soul will languish at the crossroads, for no one will summon her, or give her refuge." Serafima called the girl and said to her: "You are a big girl now and responsible for what you do. You are free to act as you wish. I cannot force you to do anything. I have neither the power nor the wish to do so. But try to understand your mother who is lying in her coffin, and do not laugh at her faith. If you laugh at your dead mother, your children will laugh at you later, at your truths and beliefs. Your mother grew up an orphan. You were her only joy. She and I stole potatoes from the field when there was nothing to eat in the wartime, and you had to be fed. We got potatoes, cut them up instead of bread, and baked them with salt, and they kept us alive. It was then that she became a believer, to bring you up. No one could live without a faith then, everyone believed in something. So don't judge and don't get in their way,

lass. I'm your teacher. I wouldn't tell you to do anything wrong. Let them say their prayers over her. But have a civic burial."

The girl listened and followed her advice. The Old Believers came and said their prayers over the old woman in her coffin (a hard worker, she was, very reliable), then they came from the brick factory, made a nice speech (about how reliable and hardworking she was) and buried her with full honours to the accompaniment of a brass band. The daughter did not have a black headscarf, so she borrowed Serafima's. And when the girl cried in the cemetery and rolled on the ground with grief, the scarf got muddy. "Take the scarf, lass, and never wash it," said Serafima. "And remember what a good soul your mother was." Many years have passed since then. The girl became a schoolteacher and now has a family of her own, but whenever she comes to Sloboda she never forgets to visit Serafima, and always recalls her good advice with tears in her eyes...

"Give up tobacco, Fima. What's the fun in it? It isn't sweet like sugar, is it? And the smell, ugh!" the visitor said suddenly from the doorway, waving her hand in disgust. "Is it dearer to you than your mother and father?"

Serafima may have understood the caustic question, but she gave the impression that she hadn't heard it properly and cupped her hand to her ear:

"What was that, Sekleteya? Have I done something wrong?"

"I was saying you haven't got long to go, so why not give it up. Your guest here doesn't smoke," she added with a quick glance to decide whether she could count on me for support.

"Well, of course God couldn't... That's why he's God. But a spade can't take the place of a man, can it? Hee, hee... No matter how you cuddle up to it, a spade is just a spade. And God can't take the place of tobacco. Do you really not smoke, Timosha? I forgot to ask you..."

"Gave it up a month ago."

"Good for you, lad. Thinking of your health, eh? Looking after your brainbox. Well, my brainbox and my health have had it."

"But what about your spirit?" the visitor interrupted.

"Where can you go with a stinking spirit like that? No one will want you," she said with conviction.

"Well, I don't smell anymore, hee, hee. My spirit's nice and clean today. Have a sniff, Sekleteya. I'm celebrating today. I should be falling about and moaning, but I'm celebrating instead. Those are my orders. Let your stomach fall, not your spirits, Serafima. I should be howling, but I'm laughing instead. Hee, hee. This is my motto: 'We are blacksmiths, and our hearts are young, and we're forging the keys of happiness.' Nastasia, where have you got to? Come and sing it with me."

"You're a clean person, Fima, but give up tobacco. It comes from a whore's womb, and reeks of whoring. It is driving you to insolence," Sekleteya counselled in an even, placid voice, gazing in pity at the errant woman, at the ivory face with wide-open, coal-black eyes.

"Perhaps I am a whore, eh? I've whored all my life with my old man, hee, hee. He's as tall as a belfry, you can lose yourself in him alright. I'm partial to whoring and losing myself. It makes me feel good. But I won't give up tobacco. It's sinful, that's true. I've got a fair old stoke-hole in my lungs now. You could do some excavating there. There's plenty of coal collected in them over the last forty years. But what would I do if I gave it up? I'd be somebody else then, not myself. I didn't give it up even on the operating table, Sekleteya. You won't believe this. You'll say I'm out of my mind... Is Anya here? She shouldn't hear it. Well, there was I about to give birth. The child was dead and wouldn't come out. Its head was sticking out, but the rest wouldn't come. It was just after the war, no modern means. I heard them talking among themselves and saying they'd have to gouge it out to save the mother. And I got so frightened that they wanted to gouge it out. The very words made my hair stand on end. My fear suddenly made me want a cigarette. 'I don't know about you, but I want a smoke,' I said suddenly. 'If you won't let me, I'll die. I tell you straight, I'll die, if you won't let me.' 'Serafima Anatolievna,' they said, 'you're an educated woman, a school teacher. What sort of example are you setting? Have you taken leave of your senses? How can you talk about smoking?' I said nothing more but climbed down from the operating table, took a cigarette from the surgeon

and went behind a curtain to smoke it. I was ashamed of smoking in front of people. I still am. So I had a good smoke and the child suddenly came out on its own."

"You're a proud woman, Serafima Anatolievna. Telling us stories to distract us," the visitor said primly, lifting a black handkerchief to her eyes, now sharp and cold. "But why the stories? A stubborn heart comes to no good in the end. Let's hope that does not happen to you, dear sister."

"I've suffered everything a person can suffer in my time, Sekleteya. I've got nothing else to fear," she lit another cigarette and hid behind the smoke. "A scraggy cat is sport for the mice."

I could not help butting in here. For some reason I felt sorry for Serafima, her loneliness, her blind restlessness and, as I saw it, her sad merriment. I realised that she had no need of my pity, and that this conversation had probably taken place many times before and did not provoke any special resistance in Serafima. It seemed to wash over her, taking up nothing but a long stretch of lonely time. So an old woman had come to see her. She could have a nice little chat with the visitor, and that seemed to lift the darkness and make it less oppressive.

"I'm not opposed to your religion," I suddenly joined in. "But I am sorry that it is so insincere, that it is built on fear, on blood. You believe that fear of the Lord is glory and honour, and joy and the crown... Fearing the Lord is the height of wisdom. Fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom. You believe that where there is no faith, everything is insecure. But you cannot build faith on fear... What does that lead to? To bloodshed, to the negation of man. Is there no escape from fear for us? What fetters are these?" But my highflown words, which were almost shouted in the tiny kitchen and therefore died away at once, were probably heard and understood by no one but Nastasia. She started up with the intention of saying something in reply, but immediately turned away to the window. "So it turns out that God loves those who fear. He loves those who fear him. But does he love those who simply love him. Or is love impossible without fear?"

Sekleteya looked at me as if I wasn't there, and after feeling offended I decided that she had not listened prop-

erly to what I was saying. And I immediately felt dislike for her tall hat, the dark-blue scarf round her head and the withered face with brown spots on the cheeks, and dull steely eyes. But I had just voiced something that had been tormenting me deep down in recent years: can one love without pity and fear, can people merge into one great family without fear, or is it, this fear, planted in human nature from the very beginning, as the tireless custodian of our whims and fancies...

I immediately felt ashamed of my thoughts. She may be an Old Believer, but she could not regard me as a desperate person in dire need of the Holy Word, as the only form of salvation, so she had nothing to say to me. We had nothing in common. I was just a stranger to her. And what could I talk about to this woman. She wasn't an all-knowing messenger, able to see and understand the book of my life right up to death, just an ordinary village woman, who had worked hard all her life and detested being idle, who had lived for many a year and suffered many hardships. I daresay her hands were twisted from the cooking and washing. And perhaps she had only one small consolation in life, to find a different, other-worldly joy, high and radiant on the mountain tops, and perhaps her life was brightened by these wordless strivings alone. So should one try to take away this striving and bring strange irritation to her quietened soul? And was she thinking only of her self, Sister Sekleteya, whose real name was Anna. She would probably have felt lonely living in paradise all on her own and eating the golden fruit. A Russian woman cannot abide having no one to talk to. Even when she is unhappy she likes a quiet, leisurely chat. Sekleteya probably pitied those who had lived alongside her in the world, all the meek and righteous. She wanted to bring them joy too, and she constantly worried about this spiritual joy and pitied Serafima whom she would visit and lecture for hours, secretly afraid of offending and boring her.

I suddenly quoted from the Bible, from a book about the wisdom of which she may have heard from the mouth of Eutichius, well-read in the Scriptures, or seen on his desk below the icon, a thick, heavy book, bound in calfskin with broad copper fastenings, written in the semi-uncial of the Old Believers and faded with age. Eutichius

must have talked to her about peace and blessing awaiting her in the world to which she was going, about original goodness and meekness, and perhaps one day helped her with a healing word that made life more bearable for her, old Anna. Perhaps Eutichius had said to her "Go help the widows and orphans, Sister," and she had gone and helped them because it suited her compassionate soul...

"You think I don't believe, my dear, but I do believe, sincerely in what I have lived for," Serafima said after long reflection. "He who breaks faith once will do it again. How could I have stayed alive if I hadn't believed? And I am alive now. I've got two orders and five medals, my dear, for helping to set children on the right path in life... Do you think I have no faith? You are wrong. My faith is my faith, and it's too late for me to change it. There's no point either..."

"Forgive me, Serafima Anatolievna. Forgive a silly, ignorant woman." Sekleteya came up, kissed the blind mistress of the house on the brow, made the sign of the cross over her and left.

"What for, my dear? Why are you apologising? It's I who should ask your pardon." She put out an aged hand, as if trying to stop her visitor from going. "I could do with a nice chat now. Sit down, where are you off to?"

The rest of the evening passed in silence. Nastasia decided to put her daughter to bed, and after that we went down to the river again. July was drawing to a close. In a week's time it would be St Elijah's Day, when you can't see the grey horse under the bush. So far nothing seemed to have changed in nature. The summer was still at its height, but towards nightfall the air held a slight chill and each sudden sound no longer echoed, but died away quickly. Sloboda was silent. Everyone had gone to bed early. Today the houses did not gleam with silver, but huddled together miserably and carelessly, their outlines blurred, and each cranny full of heavy darkness. From the open-air dance floor, a foxtrot wafted out of the unclipped bird cherry trees. There was laughter under the hill, and the pigs in Fedya Pontoner's yard grunted, emitting an occasional high-pitched squeal. Curiosity egged me on to take a peep into the neigh-

bouring yard, but it was separated from ours by a strange wall made of lots of doors with the paint peeling off. Apparently there was once a long line of barracks for seasonal workers nearby, which became derelict, when it stopped being used, and was gradually plundered by the local inhabitants. It was then that Fedya Pontoner acquired the ten doors which he put to such an unusual use. An imperious shout rang out suddenly behind the fence and a gate creaked. I instinctively pressed myself against the fence and caught sight of Pontoner through a crack. Over his shoulders was a thick padded jacket, like the protective clothing worn by infantrymen in the old days. He wore a padded hat and knee-length knitted socks. His face was pointed and smooth as a bone, as if dried from within. So this was Serafima's neighbour, the subject of so many strange stories, who was determined to live forever, which was why he wore a thick wadded coat and something resembling a monk's cowl even in the hottest weather to protect himself from the sun. One corner of the yard was divided off by poles. It was pitted, dirty and trampled down, and even in these hot July days there was a filthy puddle in the middle of the enclosure where the pigs lay stretched out languidly. Pontoner poured the swill into a long wooden trough. The boars came to life immediately, starting up and rushing towards the food, snuffling, squealing, pushing and shoving with their spotted sides, but their master sat down on the fence and started drawling some affectionate reprimands to them. Occasionally whiffs of the strong animal stench reached even this far from the sty with its columns of buzzing flies, but Fedya Pontoner, his eyes shining, watched his flock lovingly, talking to it endearingly or trying to persuade it to do something, and from the shadow of the blackcurrant bushes he suddenly looked insane to me... There was I reflecting on death, the life of the spirit, and love without fear, while this man was dreaming of living forever. Or did people just make that up about Fedya Pontoner, just spread rumours for the sake of it, simply to pass the time? One thing was certain, however. That Fedya Pontoner ate nothing but semolina, drank boiled water only, and sold his pigs alive, because he could not bear the sight of blood. It would be interesting to get to know him

better and find out more about his dreams, but terrifying too. "The things people do to brighten up their lives," I thought to console myself.

At this point Nastasia came out of the barn, having put her daughter to bed, and called me. I hurried towards her with a kind of feverish joy. She said nothing about their neighbour, and I dared not mention him for fear of provoking some snappy, unnecessary words. It was particularly quiet and peaceful in the dew-covered meadows by the river, where we went, without the anguished joy that spring and early summer usually arouse in me. The riotous blooming of the wild flowers and grasses was over. It had quickly burnt itself out. The clover was now tired and coarse, the flower had swollen, turned into bolls and hardened, ready at any moment to cast its last seed on the earth. Only the marble-white daisy was still blooming and the hairy bluebell curled up for the night, hidden away on the edge of the meadow. Peace reigned in the July meadows by the river. There was a dull, even luminescence overhead and not a cloud in the sky, not a goose-feather flecked below with pink and green, only this dull enamel gleam as far as the eye could see, and now you realised that it was a real boundless abyss. The abyss of the heavens has overturned into the river also, making that seem like an abyss as well, like nothingness, motionless and passive, imperceptible to the eye, flowing to nowhere.

"How I don't want to go back to the town!" Nastasia exclaimed suddenly, stretching luxuriously in an animal-like way, tensing her high bosom, relaxing for a moment and allowing her reserved nature a brief instant of freedom. Then immediately, probably upset by my meek, anguished expression, she withdrew again, her face clouded and she crossed her taut arms. Why did she find me so alien, so disagreeable, that after venturing out of her refuge for a moment, she had to shrink back immediately? Perhaps she could sense deceit and infidelity in me? Or something similar to herself? Or did she find my gypsy face with its wicked brown eyes and full lips so repellent? And noticing once more this scornful manner towards me, I could not help flaring up, suppressing my shyness, and becoming less inhibited in my speech.

So two people, two suspicious strangers, each longing

for something of their own, walked over a quiet evening meadow full of a dull radiance.

"I feel hemmed in by the town. It's destroying me. I can't breathe there. There's not enough air."

"Well, live here in Sloboda then. It's almost the country. And your old, blind mother needs some help. You've deserted your mother and father, you know. In the town you are free from all sorts of unpleasant jobs and inconveniences, what more do you want..."

"I can't stand you, Timofei Ilyich," Nastasia flared up, but instead of turning back she made her way down to the pale river. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"In that horrid way. Have you been beaten a lot?"

"Do you treat everyone like this, or only me?"

I felt angry and bitter and slowed my step, but could not make up my mind to turn back.

Suddenly Nastasia turned round and stared at me from a distance, frowning shortsightedly. My unprepossessing bulky form probably triggered off something inside her, and she laughed unexpectedly, throwing back her head. She laughed long and sadly, as if waiting for something, but I was so excited that the words stuck in my throat. A devil was urging me on. I had the feeling that someone was watching, laughing and grimacing, exulting in my disgrace. "You're not a coward," the demon whispered, "grab her and get her down in the grass. Enjoy yourself."

"Oh, how I don't want to go to the town," she suddenly said longingly. "Just think, Timofei Ilyich, home's been reduced to a roof over your head, and love to bed. I can't live in these modern flats. I can't stand anything that's for everybody and possessed by everybody. It's like hatred inside me, disgust. I can't bear identical furniture, identical clothes, identical feelings, identical people. It's like a disease—our universal sameness."

"It makes you want to hang yourself," I said deliberately adopting her sad tone and quickly forgetting the recent hurt to my pride. I suddenly saw Nastasia in a different light. The nerve of love was quivering nakedly, tormenting her lonely soul. It was as if I had suddenly found my double. That was why my heart ached and was drawn so strongly to this woman. She wanted purification, kind-

ness and compassion, human merging and willing union.

"That's rubbish," she stopped short, giving me a puzzled, heavy look. It was remarkable how Nastasia could change. She would stop laughing and wilt, droop, like a sea fish cast up on the shore. It was like snuffing out a candle. One moment her face was radiant and moulded by kindness, and the next it assumed an air of gloomy suspiciousness most uncharacteristic of it. If only her coal-black eyes would melt for a moment, what depths they would reveal.

"The rope should be soaped and measured for length. Strong, thin twine is best and gives the least pain." I drew my finger round my throat. "But why torment yourself and others? Why not just bid farewell to everything that is so painful to you?" A hilly cloud hung low over the clear mirror-like river, its underside tinted with lilac, and on top of it, as if in a saddle, lay the green lamp of a sparkling star, as if a stern lantern had flowed away together with the vessel into the boundless expanses. "Sweet Nastasia. I am laughing at myself. Forgive my blathering. I am laughing at myself, because I want to love. I want to love! And you want to love. We want to love. See that star. We only think that it's a star and that starlight is shining on us. It's a trick, an illusion, a heresy. There's no light there. It's just a reflection of a candle in God's drawing room, where we won't be allowed in," I went on babbling nonsense. For goodness sake, why didn't my tongue fall off? Why didn't it just shrivel up and drop off like a pea pod? But the dam had burst within me, my heart warmed, sensing the approach of tears, and at that moment I was almost happy. "You should fall in love, Nastasia." I was talking nonsense, and I thought it strange that Nastasia was putting up with it, not going away, but listening, moving closer to me, her eyes round and flashing wildly. "When a girl got married in the old days, the bridegroom's friends said this to her. 'In your husband's bedchamber is a wooden bed, and on that bed is a feather mattress, and on that mattress are downy pillows, and on the wall above that bed is a pin of oak, a kind of wooden nail, and on that wooden nail is a silken lash... Now listen, this part is just right for you... A silken lash with three ends: one end is long, and the second is long, but the

third is very cunning. When it strikes, the blood sprays up to the ceiling..."

"Do you often beat your wife?" she asked inquisitively, then burst out laughing again, throwing back her head, for the third time that day. Something had changed in Nastasia, a kind of fever had gripped her and would not let her go, as if she had caught a glimpse of happiness, but had drawn back in fright, afraid of believing it. "I used to tell my husband: 'Beat me, Andrei, and I'll love you all the more.' But he didn't beat me. Then one day he did, and I left him."

"You love him," I repeated, suddenly sad with jealousy, and put my hand on her cool shoulder as if casually. Nastasia looked at me askance, but said nothing, so I removed my hand hastily and stepped away slightly. "Go back to him. What's stopping you?"

"No, no," Nastasia exclaimed in alarm. "What do you know about love? You don't even believe it exists. Let's stop this conversation... I couldn't possibly do that, Timofei Ilyich. I've begun to dream about him each night and that makes me sad. He comes and stands at the head of the bed, like a ghost, and whispers. I know the words are not true, and I can't make them out. In the morning I wake up sad. Sad for my past life, for the way it had gone."

"If you're sad, you must love him. People are sad when they are parted from someone they love. It's like being homesick..."

Nastasia frowned at these words, her face darkened and her lips quivered angrily, but she restrained herself and replied sadly:

"No, I don't love him."

"Well, you can't feel sad then," I insisted stubbornly. For some reason I wanted Nastasia to contradict me, as if that would provide a happy solution to something in my life...

"I'm sad... Sad from pity. I pity him, that's why I'm sad. I pity everyone. You, Timofei Ilyich, and my father and mother. I feel so sorry for everyone, that I don't want to go on living... My husband humiliated me, but I feel sorry for him," she said sadly, obviously oppressed at having kept silent so long. "I keep thinking that he is suffering, that he loves me, and that's why he humiliated

me. Although I know that it isn't true. That he was just being nasty and he doesn't love me. He doesn't love the person inside me, because I want to be myself. Not a bedfellow, not a possession, just myself. I know he doesn't love me, but I've gone back to him so many times and each time it was a mistake, but I'm still sorry for him... Why don't people want other people to be themselves?"

"I don't know what to say. It's my problem, too."

"Well, don't say anything. Let's just keep quiet."

But I could no longer keep quiet. Everything inside me was churning and trembling feverishly. My heart was hanging on a tiny stalk, about to snap off. It was quivering like a frozen birdcherry leaf and, giving myself up to a sudden surge of joy, I tried to say that people are only frank when they are outside in nature, because nature cannot be deceived, but the devil whispered cunningly over my left shoulder: "Have a go now, cut out the talking."

Nastasia was half-turned towards me, again sad and withdrawn. I grabbed her shoulders, pulled her hungrily towards me and put my mouth to her dry, rough lips which suddenly became thin and stony. Nastasia did not get confused, cry out angrily or start up. She merely tensed her lithe, strange body. I tried to bury my face into the light blue lawn cotton that held the fragrance of the garden and a bitter-sweet body smell, but Nastasia caught hold of my crazed head and slipped away from me without undue effort.

"I'm unhappy, Nastya. You must save me," I whispered in an inflamed, dry voice, painfully and tearfully sorry for myself. Suddenly everything inside me seemed to turn over, and I saw myself as a hurt child. I was eight years old, alone in the world under a frost-covered birch tree and gazing longingly at a lighted, frosty windowpane, waiting for a strange temporary death and a sweet word of forgiveness from my mother... If only I could touch Nastasia, fall on her shoulder and hear an answering word of consent, I would have immediately been comforted and reborn. Only a moment ago I had been ready to fly, and even seemed to feel the streams of golden air flowing round me, but then I had dropped suddenly like a frozen, wayside milestone, void of all life and desire. There are whirlwinds of love that seem to rise up from

nowhere, releasing the soul from its numb shell and casting it right up to the feathery clouds with lilac shadows in their spurs. But, dear Lord, how hard it is for the soul to return to the tight thorax, to resign itself and languish there in solitude waiting for an opportunity. My heart wept, although my eyes were still dry. "Save me, Nastya." I repeated jerkily. "I've thought it all over... I went hunting in the spring and decided that if I killed a wood-grouse I would go on living. I fired point-blank and missed. So that meant... Why am I telling you this? It's silly. Forgive me. It must have been the sun today. My heart aches... It's silly. You and I are almost strangers, aren't we? We met yesterday by chance, and tomorrow we will part. Two stars in a vast universe. It's just that I suddenly hoped we might... That's silly... It's the sun... There's a wall between us. We can't understand each other, there's a wall between us. It's all so stupid..."

I could not understand what had happened to me. Perhaps the tension of the last few months had worn me out, the constant battle with myself. I wept bitterly with great anguish, like a tormented drunken man, and could not pull myself together.

"Are you really crying?" Nastya asked incredulously. She tried to pull my hand away from my face, but I did not let her. I was ashamed of my tears. "Are you really crying? Yes, you are, aren't you?" she repeated mistrustfully, as if trying to persuade herself, and suddenly kissed my hand.

It was a long time before I recovered, stopped crying and calmed down. Nastya stood next to me obediently. I was ashamed of turning my swollen face towards her, but I sensed her eyes on me all the time. Through my wet eyelashes the dim night air seemed vibrant and jelly-like. The river flowed sombrely out of its earthly crevice into the heavenly expanses full of purple luminescence. How quickly everything in nature had changed, alternated and fallen into a wary silence, awaiting the unknown morn. The midnight sky had shifted and filled with a lilac haze, and a worn, wretched moon had pecked its way through this moving haze.

We came back unexpectedly late and, trying not to make a noise, entered secretively (perhaps some secret,

some as yet unvoiced agreement, had arisen between us). The gate leaning crookedly on its heel, which, in spite of my endeavours, scraped angrily, was reluctant to admit us. Perhaps we really did have a secret agreement? Otherwise why did we suddenly exchange alarmed glances, each noticing that we were walking furtively.

The porch was obscured by bird cherry trees, and we were so engrossed in ourselves that we did not notice Serafima until the very last moment. She was sitting on the step like a plucked partridge, in the long nightdress that she had worn down to the river, and she was shivering.

"What are you doing out here, Mother?" asked Nastasia in alarm. She must have sensed something from her mother's expression, because she immediately wilted and looked older. "Let's go indoors at once..."

"It wouldn't matter, except that I haven't got any cigarettes, see? I'd just gone to bed, then he came back and shouted from the street: 'Come outside for a minute, Serafima.' So I did as he said and went out. 'What do you want?' I asked him. Then he just walked past me and locked the door, the devil, hee, hee!' Serafima gave a sudden laugh or sob and coughed lightly. "Don't fly off the handle at him, lass. I used to sleep soundly. Chrissy would come home late and knock, but I didn't hear him. 'One day you'll fall fast asleep and never wake up again!' he used to say. 'And a good thing too,' I'd tell him. Sanka, our son, used to bawl his head off. One day he was crying, and I was having such a lovely sleep that I thought to myself 'Thank goodness the lad's not bawling today. He's quietened down and let me get some shut-eye too.' Next morning the neighbour came and asked me: 'Was anything wrong last night, Serafima? I thought something terrible must have happened, because that lad of yours was howling all night.' That's how soundly I was sleeping. But these days I hardly close my eyes. ...Don't go on at your father, Nastasia. Don't make him angry. What's the point over something like this? Let him sleep, the lazy devil, and sober up. See what he's started doing. One day in the winter he played the same trick on me. Left me out in the cold for two hours with nothing on. I had to go into hospital."

Serafima did not curse or complain, but simply waited

patiently for him to take pity on her. I found this behaviour most confusing. What could I do in a strange house? What could I say? No good ever comes from sticking your nose in other people's business. Nastasia was not listening to her mother. She kept looking impatiently at the house, obviously not knowing how to tackle it, whether to knock the door down or to try and persuade her drunken father to open it. Then she made up her mind and pushed her way through the currant bushes, with a gloomy "Come and help me." I lifted her up as well as I could, feeling the strong, lithe body and hot sloping thighs.

The old man was not asleep, as it turned out. He was larking about with a little stray dog by the table, sticking a horny finger into its mouth and probably giggling, because his face with the bushy eyebrows was wrinkling happily. Nastasia banged on the window menacingly and shook her fist. Chrysanth suddenly caught sight of his daughter, started up in fright and rushed to the door.

"Have you gone crazy? Playing a trick like that on mother! How dare you..."

But Chrysanth went on playing with the puppy, sticking a thick, gnarled finger into its slobbering mouth, and said:

"There you go, you little devil... Biting again, just you wait. I'll give you what-for... Just look at the way she treats her father. She's forgotten I'm her father. I can give her a good whipping, yes, a good hiding. As easy as anything... Well, we've had a fine old time today, you little wolf-cub, haven't we? Shurka's a real hot one, and I'm not so bad myself either, still keep my end up... Ugh, you dirty devil, you've pissed on your grandad. Off you get, you're infectious, I bet. Got a black palate, haven't you!"

"Shup up, you drunken old devil. You should be ashamed of yourself," Serafima reproached him, smoking hungrily behind the door. "Talking all that rubbish in front of a guest. They might even believe you."

"But I wasn't telling a lie. Why should I lie? I don't get paid for lying," Chrysanth jumped up, throwing the pup onto the floor; it whimpered and made for the door, leaving a dark puddle behind it. "Now have I ever lied?" He gave his wife a savage look and bared his dark toothless gums. I really let Shurka have it, the bitch. She

didn't even squeak... I did her proud, made her sweat like a pig. 'Ee, but you're a devil, Chrysanth,' she says. 'You could teach the young'uns a thing or two.'

"You're a swine, not my father," Nastasia whispered. She jumped up and slapped the old man hard on the face, first on one side, then on the other. Chrysanth made no attempt to defend himself, but merely exclaimed confusedly and shook his drunken head, at a loss for words.

"Raising your hand at your own father... How dare you? Fima, help, love, she'll murder me."

And to my surprise Serafima ran up to her husband and shielded him with her tiny body, like a rain-drenched fledgeling that even a hungry dog would pass by, her grey cobwebby hair, usually neatly combed, had slipped out of the comb and was all tangled up. The top of Serafima's head barely reached her husband's broad chest, covered with hair that was once a foxy red colour, but now long and grey, the same broad chest on which she had slept for so many nights. She stretched out her arms and began punching out groping for her daughter in the dim space, making foi the slightest sound.

"Don't hit him, lass," she begged. "What good would it do, eh? He's an old man, your father."

Chrysanth's alarm disappeared. He crouched behind his wife, dressed in a long shift like a shroud, and was already winking at me, making signs with his fingers over her thin shoulder and laughing openly. He was an old man who had lived a long life, but he behaved like a child. All his habits were childish, but strangely cruel and hurtful.

"You're broody old hens..." he muttered proudly, throwing out his chest. "You both come from my rib. Damn you... Any woman would be pleased to have me, shiver my timbers. And who's best at hunting? Me. And what about fishing? Me too. You're safe as houses with me, nothing to fear. All the women are after me. I don't want them, ha, ha. But they won't leave me alone, the pests, the lousy lot... No, I'll give you what for, just you wait. I'll scare the living daylights out of you... Perhaps I will leave Fimka, eh, Timofei Ilyich? She's no good for anything these days, nothing but skin and bone. You couldn't make a good jelly out of her." Chrysanth sat down in the doorway, but kept craning his

neck apprehensively to see what Nastasia was doing in the bedroom. She was sitting on the bed with her hands over her ears, swaying dully. "Maybe I want a son... So what? Maybe I'm crying out for a son. Can you give me one? No... You're nothing but a stopper for an old barrel these days."

I felt disgusted. I would have liked to tell Chrysanth to be quiet, to deliver some kind of sobering reprimand such as "if you go on behaving like this I'll leave in the middle of the night and never set foot in this house again." Or at least say something to show whose side I was on, so that the old man stopped winking at me. But I found myself muttering something with a tongue of cotton wool, just like Chrysanth, and doing something strange with my face, probably trying to wink back, judging by the way my left eye was opening and closing, and I felt disgusted with myself. Instead of doing something, I was grimacing in a revolting fashion, copying Chrysanth's behaviour. Yet at the same time I wanted to cry out: "Why are you tormenting each other, you two. There's only a little bit of your life left now. Wake up, get up, go to bed, and that's the end of you. You'll be wrapped in darkness far deeper and longer lasting than blindness. So why not leave a happy memory behind you that will be passed on from generation to generation and never fade...

"You want to upset me, don't you," asked Serafima slowly, poking a finger into the air. "But you can't, because I won't listen to your insults." She turned her back proudly and went into the bedroom. Chrysanth responded by spitting, laughing contemptuously and going out onto the porch. I did not yet realise what sort of night lay ahead of me, and, hoping to find oblivion as quickly as possible and not see anyone else, I went into the bedroom. Serafima was obviously not feeling well. She seemed lost, confused, and was kneeling by the open trunk rummaging through the flat, floppy clothes that smelt of mothballs. The trunk was a huge one, of the sort rarely found in people's houses today, with a metal binding and dim mica mirrors, faded painting, and a high-sprung lid on the reverse side of which there was an oil painting of kissing doves that looked more like grouse. I remember a similar trunk in my grandfather's

town house, where my mother used to hide the sugar from me.

"He wants to make me look silly. But I'm not having any, hee, hee. I'll keep out of his way," Serafima was saying in a strange, dull voice. Now and then she glanced over her shoulder and looked round the room, or rather, the dusty ceiling, sighing deeply and bitterly. Nastasia was still sitting on the bed, bent double, her hands over her ears, swaying dully. I wanted to go to bed as soon as possible, but it was embarrassing to say anything. "I should get out straightaway," I thought miserably, remembering my recent hysterics. But the old woman was muttering, her blind hands rummaging through the dresses, skirts, and scarves, occasionally shaking them noisily, then putting them back again and smoothing them down, until she fished a bundle out from the very bottom and put it at the head of the bed. I watched these preparations distractedly, still not realising what Serafima intended to do.

"I don't take up much room," she was saying in a meek pained voice. "I'm like a button. I could fit in a cradle now... Ee, just think of that. I've gone back to the cradle, hee, hee. My father made me a lovely cradle out of mahogany, lined with down."

Serafima pulled herself up with difficulty, wheezing and clutching hard at the sides of the trunk bound with metal strips. I saw the blood rush to her cheeks and her ears go blue. Suddenly she heaved up her left foot and hopped nimbly into the trunk, lay down in it, turned this way and that, then curled up and closed her eyes. As if she were dreaming sweet dreams, Serafima gave a terrible smile and groped above her with one hand, as if feeling for the lid of the trunk to close it. Dear Lord, what madness! What a day! It was enough to break your heart and destroy your reason... Aunty Fima, Aunty Fima, my blessed Serafima, come to your senses, my angel. One mad person is enough. I must have mumbled this out loud or exclaimed, because Nastasia suddenly came to, glanced incomprehendingly at her mother and began laughing nervily, head thrown back and arms waving.

"Move over, Mum, and I'll get in too. Well, I never..."

Serafima pursed her lips offendedly when she felt the warm breathing above her and turned onto her side. There

were dark circles under her eyes, her nose seemed sharper and paler. Nastasia bent even lower and whispered loudly into her ear:

"You've had your little joke, now that's enough. Go to bed."

"I won't sleep with him..."

"Oh, come on," Nastasia wheedled tearfully. "Oh, you children. What am I going to do with you? You can't spend a single day happily. First it's one, then it's the other." She knelt down and wept, kissing her mother's tiny head with its big ears. "Children, children, why must you torment each other so..."

Feeling her daughter's bitter tears fall on her face, Serafima tried to sit up, but the blood rushed to her head and the old woman squealed thinly like a hare.

"What's the matter, Mother! Mother!" cried Nastasia in sudden alarm. "Help me, for goodness sake, Timofei Ilyich. Can't you see? For pity sake..."

I carried Serafima Anatolievna over to the bed. The old woman was as light as a feather. The withered weak arms dangled limply and the shrivelled body lay woodenly in my hands. "How can she go on living like this?" the thought flashed through my mind. "Perhaps she's dead." I lay her carefully on the bed, and she almost disappeared into the feather mattress. Only her head stuck out with a death-like sharpness on the hard pillow. You could have cut yourself on the nose and hollow cheeks. Nastasia prised open the firmly pursed lips, blue and funereal, and gave her some drops of validole. I supported Serafima's head with one hand, holding the glass in the other and helping her to drink. I suddenly realised that this is how a dandelion dies. It buds, opens its petals and blooms showing off its sun-embroidered cap to its fellow plants, but then its curls turn grey and fly away, and only the base remains, withered and drooping along the black stalk, then that too succumbs, collapsing under wind and rain, and all trace of the dandelion seems to have disappeared. But in springtime a sliver of green suddenly shoots out of this pinch of dust and it opens up gaily and joyously, straining towards the sun... No, I lie. I did not think these thoughts then. I imagined all this later, when I was spending a lonely night on the seashore. Then my heart was gripped by fear of death, for I had never seen

a person die... I had thought a great deal about death last spring. At that time it seemed a wonderful release from life, both natural and desirable. But it turned out that a person can die simply and unnoticed, as if he has nothing to lose or leave in this world full of beautiful things. Everything was commonplace, almost ugly, and no one outside the house cared. If anyone had felt pity at that moment, he would have sensed trouble and hurried here without a special summons to give succour to the old woman's soul and help her pass away in a dignified fashion. It pained me to think that this death was not in keeping with Serafima's noble soul. It would have been a fitting end for some drunken vagabond lying in the snow by a fence, or some useless person who had never been able to work or love. But why had Serafima's noble soul suddenly taken refuge in such unsightly, coarsened flesh?

Nastasia brought a hot-water bottle, kissed her mother, then placed her lips on the ice-cold, motionless mouth and began to infuse her warm breath. Serafima groaned faintly, opened her blind eyes and moisture appeared on her hollow temples.

"If she doesn't start feeling better, we must get the doctor," Nastasia said. I nodded in agreement and went outside quickly.

Chrysanth was sitting on the porch nursing the dog. The stray pup with its big head was growling contentedly. I sat down beside him and stared hard at the old man, trying to understand him.

"See how she loves me, that Fima, eh?" Chrysanth said suddenly. "My daughter wants to beat me, but Fima says: 'Don't touch your father. Over my dead body...' That's love for you, shiver my timbers," he bragged naively.

"Serafima Anatolievna is poorly," I said dully, no longer surprised by anything.

"She'll get better," Chrysanth replied calmly. "She'll outlive me, touch wood. There's nothing of her left to die. Just a pile of skin and bone." He turned back to the puppy, teasing it, sticking a coarse finger into its slobbering mouth.

"Was that true about Shurka?" I asked for some reason. In the open air everything that had happened in the

kitchen seemed silly and unreal. "You and Shurka..."

"Of course not," the old man admitted readily, pulling the grey curls over his eyes, but he grinned happily, as if remembering something forbidden and amusing. "What would she want with me... It would take a tractor to plough her..."

"Why did you lie then? What was the point of it?"

"What are you talking about?" he looked away. "About that? Well, Fima shouldn't be so cocky. Showing off like that. She's no bigger than a sparrow, but she goes preening her feathers... But how can you understand, Timofei Ilyich? And why interfere in other people's business?" He gave me a hard, sad look, as if enquiring about something, and I quickly averted my gaze. "See what I mean? Kindness isn't a rupture, you can't get it however much you try. You're either born with it, or you don't have it."

I said nothing, listening to what was going on in the house and thinking all the time of Nastasia. My heart was aching. I was tormenting it constantly myself, and that was worst of all. I writhed at the thought that it would be shameful and ridiculous to see Nastasia again. It would be better to leave the house in the middle of the night and disappear, get lost. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes tightly, feeling strangely empty, my head as heavy as lead. I immediately felt dizzy and collapsed overwhelmed by the darkness. When I came to I was surprised to hear the old man's voice, gentle and smooth. He was still fondling the puppy, pulling its floppy ears, as if warming himself on the dog's warm, live body.

"Now there's someone who won't let you down if it loves you. A dog. We call a rotten person a dog, but we should use it for a good person. If a dog loves you, it won't let you down. Not like some people..."

They did call the doctor early next morning and he gave Serafima an injection to relieve her heart which made her feel better. But a strange restlessness suddenly gripped her. You could see that she was worried about something, even in her short sleep the old woman kept tossing about, calling someone and crying. When she came to, she asked to be lifted up to the pillows and for her husband to come. It took a long time to rouse Chrysanth. Eventually he appeared looking puffy, with bags

under his eyes, and a sullen expression. He stood by the bed, scratching his hairy chest angrily.

"Well, what is it? Can't you leave a person alone?"

Serafima paid no attention to his words. Her hands kept darting about restlessly, smoothing the sheet or fiddling with the neck of her nightdress, and the blue lips were whispering something, obviously searching for the right word or perhaps trying to say the one that was so hard to utter.

"I'm dying, Chrysanth," Serafima said pitifully. Her tone was not dignified, and her voice shook. "We should let the children know, tell them to come... I'm dying, Chrysanth," she repeated more firmly, "and I want you to know that I've never loved you... All the forty-nine years of our life together I've been pretending."

Chrysanth stood motionless. He even seemed to have stopped breathing. He looked at his wife in silence, half-frowning or half-pretending to smile, then he went out to the woodshed, without saying a word, his galoshes thumping heavily. You might have thought that Serafima's words would provoke some kind of punishment, or at least a thin exclamation or short thundering outburst. The old woman had probably expected something to happen. But there had not been a word, only the heavy thumping of galoshes. So he'd gone. Oh, my goodness! Perhaps he didn't love her? If he'd have loved her the tiniest bit he would have shouted and stamped his feet... But perhaps she had killed him with her admission. Oh, what a fool she was! What has she said! What had got into her to make her say that? She had wanted fear, anger or tears from him, to make up for what he had done to her yesterday. She'd wanted to play a joke on him, then forget it. But he was as wooden as an idol.

"What have I done, Nastasia, lass... Call the old man in. He might do himself some harm... I know him... He might be looking for a rope... He's capable of hanging himself, isn't he?"

Chrysanth had collapsed on a pile of sweaters in the woodshed, irritated that his wife had interrupted his nap for no reason. He had been too sleepy to understand what she was saying. No sooner had he stretched out his legs contentedly, than Nastasia reappeared. The old man dared not disobey his daughter. He went back to the

bed again. Serafima's face was tense with expectation. She stared blindly at the ceiling. From her husband's heavy breathing she realised that he was beside her and suddenly grasped his heavy hand, kissed it and placed it on her breast. She stroked the familiar hand with its swollen veins long and tenderly, and the old man looked away smiling stupidly. He glanced at me to see if I was watching, but I hastily closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"Kneel down, Chrysanth, love," Serafima asked suddenly. The old man kneeled down obediently by the bed, and his wife stroked his face lightly, barely touching it, as if she were committing it to memory, to carry her husband's appearance away with her. "There we are. Our life together is over, and it's as if we've never lived it... It's our golden anniversary in a month's time and look at me, eh? Why did I have to go and pop off now?" Serafima began crying softly.

"That's enough of that. You'll outlive me," mumbled Chrysanth. From a distance, if you didn't listen hard, he sounded quite inarticulate. "There's nothing in you to die, old girl. You're a piece of dried fish."

"Dr-i-ed f-i-sh," Serafima whined. "But I'm dying all the same, you old tormentor." She stopped short and bit her tongue, then exclaimed sadly: "Why did I have to... Perhaps it's all for the best... Perhaps it's the best solution. Otherwise I'd be a burden to you... Forgive me, Chrysanth Alexeyevich..."

"Alright, I'm going to have some shut-eye," Chrysanth replied, with apparent indifference. "And don't call me again. That's the end of it."

"I'll die and he won't believe it. He'll think I was lying," said Serafima calmly, waiting until the door slammed behind her husband. Suddenly there was a gurgling sound in her throat, as if she were laughing or crying. Had the old woman taken leave of her senses or returned to the state in which her life began?

That afternoon, having heard that Serafima was dying, the Old Believer Eutichius appeared unexpectedly. He was wearing an old-fashioned black striped jacket with long lapels, knee-length patterned socks and shiny galoshes. He was all shining and quiet, with wide-open, pale-blue eyes, which seemed to hold nothing but meekness, and his face with the large forehead was framed with

silver hair like pure hoar frost. His hair was cut in pudding-basin style with the top of the yellow turnip showing slightly. His thin, wispy, flowing beard shook as he breathed, and a silver cross could be seen through it. Whence, from what expanses, had this man appeared? He looked as if he had emerged from one of those ancient retreats of which only the names survive today. As if he had come down the ages, uninvited and prophetic, like a huntsman pursuing a departing soul. Eutichius regarded me with great curiosity, evidently trying to guess where I was from and whether I was a threat, but my ordinary, commonplace appearance must have reassured him, and he went through to the bedroom quickly.

Serafima seemed to be asleep. Nastasia was sitting by the head of the bed, but she was not surprised when Eutichius came in. Her face, dark from lack of sleep, even brightened, as if she were pleased to see the visitor, and she hastily drew up a chair for him. Eutichius gazed silently at the sick woman, the gaunt face with bags under the eyes, at the snow-white, neatly combed hair, and the strangely white arms crossed on the blanket. Sensing his searching gaze, Serafima held out for some time, her eyelashes flickering, but she was the first to give way and pretend to wake up. She might just as well not have opened her eyes, for when they were open they looked like two cooled black coals that had lost their living depth and the light from the nearby window slipped over them as if they were metal.

"I'm being called, Eutichius Pavlovich."

"Christ be with you, my sister. He will call us all to Himself... Have you regained your sight before death?"

"No. I knew it was you by the smell."

They were both silent. Eutichius parted his beard and pulled out the silver cross, as if summoning himself to perform a sad, but noble duty, but the spade-like hand was a real peasant one, too large for his thin body.

"Ah, sister... We roar like bears and groan like pigeons, waiting for the final judgement that does not come. But we shall all be called on the Day of Judgement, yes, we shall be called. Yet perhaps it is a fairy-tale, a lie, eh?" He stared hard at Serafima, trying to divine the state of her soul from the expression of her face, to find out whether she was ready for conversion to the true faith. "Perhaps

they're lying, eh? Christ was sold for thirty pieces of silver, and we must repent for eternity. What do we care? We'll be scattered as dust, manure on good old mother earth... Are you leaving in peace, sister, or are you tormented by the Devil's claws? Do they tear at your breast? Aren't you afraid of the brazier, if they begin to fry you? Won't you wail there on the Day of Judgement?" Here Eutichius stopped short, realising that he had got carried away, and was perhaps frightening the old woman for nothing. Meekness was what was required, a quiet word and she would follow.

"I do fear the brazier," Serafima whispered, as if lacking the strength to exclaim out loud. "How can you help fearing it, eh? And what if they throw me in a pot of tar? And I'm afraid of the devils. They'll butt me with their horns. I've always been afraid of horns ever since I was a child. Are their horns real ones or made of iron?" The old woman was breathing heavily, speaking with long pauses and staring blindly at the ceiling as if she could see her future punishments there.

"He who does the truth is just. He who does sin is from the devil..."

"If they've got horns, and iron ones at that, I'd do better to turn to dust, eh?" Serafima asked a little more loudly and Nastasia, who had obviously guessed her mother's game from the tone of her voice, giggled behind her hand and turned away to the window. "Chrysanth has put some horns on me in my long life... Oh, I'm afraid of horns."

"You have lived before our eyes, Serafima. We know of no one meeker than you, and we shall not forget your kind heart. You bear our name, sacred and winged. You shall ascend to Heaven. Come to us and we shall pray to God for you forever."

"I would come, but I smoke tobacco. Will you take me with my tobacco?"

"Give it up. Repent and this sin will be forgiven."

"It's all the same under the ground. They take the smelly ones there too." Serafima seemed to have perked up. There was strength in her voice now and her former curiosity had reawakened.

"But where will your spirit go?"

"When I was alive, my spirit went into my children,

didn't it? My spirit is in Nastasia. God is good. He would take me with tobacco. I'll puff the other way. I won't puff in His face. I'll sit at a distance, munching a golden apple."

Eutichius had realised some time ago that Serafima was pulling his leg, but he forgave her and did not blame her, for he was sorry to see her leave the world with such a restless spirit, in which everything raged and rebelled. Does a person joke at such a time? Is it not better to reflect on the way that lies ahead and prepare for it?

"Your spirit is sinful, not smelly. It is in fire, instead of in peace. It will be painful for you there. Reject worldly things in your final hours and find peace... Come to us, and we will pray for you and remember you forever. Is that not a blessing, eternal remembrance? Everyone else will forget you. You will be lost for them. You will disappear from their memories like foam on the sand, and only in us will you find refuge."

"You are forgiving someone their sins, but mine is such a small one... Is it so difficult to 'orgive I've had one weakness in my life—tobacco, and you want to deprive me of that... If you take that away it means I shall be pushed around there too where you are sending me. They'll take my tobacco away from me and say: 'Do this, and don't do that,' won't they? I have lived by my own faith, helping when I could and striving for equality, and I've got two orders. I'm surprised at you, Eutichius. So I just give up tobacco and go to heaven, do I? Some poor soul will be writhing about in the flames and butted by iron horns, while I'm looking out of the window and eating golden apples? They would stick in my throat... Don't tempt me, Eutichius, I beg you. I've stopped wanting to die, I'm afraid to. I was tempted by power once, you know? Hee, hee. I was first secretary of the village Soviet in Vaz'tsa. A woman as first secretary! I was a tiny little thing and you could hardly see me behind my desk, but my pride started nudging me straightaway. So I put a pile of books under my behind and sat there like a king on a throne. One day a hunter with a wooden leg came and asked for bread, but I wouldn't give him any. 'Where can I get bread for you,' I said, 'this isn't an almshouse.' They say that afterwards he lay in his forest hut, banging on the floor with his wooden leg

and repeating: 'Sara be damned! Sara be damned!' I still remember that. And I said to myself: 'Don't get too big for your boots, Serafima.'"

"Christ preached that too..."

"But what does that mean? That I shall be eating apples and perhaps someone I've lived alongside all my life, like that Chrysanth of mine, is being butted by horns?"

"He is a sinner, but if he repents he will be forgiven."

"I don't want that..."

"But sinners should suffer somewhere for the evil they have done," Eutichius suddenly burst out angrily, jumping up from his chair and stamping his feet in their shiny galoshes and patterned, knee-length woolen socks. "Sins must be punished somewhere."

"Let them be punished on earth. That's how it should be... And I'll be faithful to my tobacco." Serafima pulled out a packet of cigarettes from under the pillow and put it on her chest.

"Oh, Serafima," Eutichius exclaimed, lifting up a finger prophetically and shaking it before the old woman's blind face. "Yours will not be an easy death... There are many great and famous, but secrets are revealed to the meek. That is why you cannot understand us, for the demon of pride is within you." Suddenly he bowed quietly, made the sign of the cross and whispered as he went out: "But you are ours, our angel by the throne, our winged seraph."

Two days later I left, my briefcase stuffed with forestry manuals which marked, as it were, the beginning of my new profession. Chrysanth produced two big mugs of wine in parting and kissed me three times, brushing away an unexpected tear roughly with his little finger. Serafima called me to her bedside, ordered me to kneel down and ran her hands lovingly over my head. The old woman smelt of withering skin. "How good that you came to see us, eh? How good that you thought of coming. We are blacksmiths, our hearts are young, eh? Give my regards to your mother when you see her and say 'We are blacksmiths, our hearts are young'..."

Nastasia accompanied me to the quayside, sad and withdrawn. For the last few days we had avoided each other and kept quiet, as if afraid of remembering what had happened by the river. Now the words were teeming

painfully inside me and dying away in my head. There were crowds of people on the landing-stage, sitting around, laughing and yelling wildly, and in this commotion a sudden, almost stupefying quietness descended upon us, and each of us seemed to hear what the other was thinking. Two people, half turning away as if in misery, waiting with anguished impatience for the farewell siren, but joined by a strange common guilt. Nastasia suddenly stood up and kissed me on the forehead with her dry, rough lips, as if she were seeing me off to mortal combat. "Look me up when you're in town, will you?" she asked and hurried off as if afraid of my reply. I ran up the gangplank, turned round at the top and caught sight of Nastasia's drooping shoulders and long proud neck. She was walking along the bank in the direction of home, dragging her feet in the sand like a convict, and she soon disappeared round a bend in the river, like a vision. And that is how she remained in my anguished heart.

Then today the news of Chrysanth's death arrived. So Serafima was suffering as Eutichius had prophesied.

Who groaned? Where did the groan come from? Surely I am not so full of love that I groaned aloud? Am I destined to love, then? I had given up hope completely, withering like a lonely blade of grass on the dry sand.

Just as I was, in trousers and a vest, I jumped out of the window and rushed out through the garden gate. Mishka Kren was still sitting on the whale vertebra, as if it were a chair, rubbing his brown neck and gazing vacantly at the sea. I approached him silently. The sandy ridge, covered with pale prickly grass, muffled my footsteps. I glanced sideways at Kren and saw an unexpected submissiveness and peace in the rugged wrinkled face, covered with patches of grey bristle. I felt awkward about hailing him, and had no excuse for doing so, but hearing my restrained heavy breathing, he jumped up in alarm, dropped his glance and walked off quickly. His rough heels drummed on the planks like horse's hooves.

Three vertebrae, like three yellow stumps, were all that remained of the whale, that once gigantic creature full of indomitable spirit. I sat down on a vertebra, hollowed out and smooth like an armchair, and stared at the sea. What made old Kren come down here at night? What did he see in the distance with his rheumy eyes?

What ghosts loomed out of the lilac-coloured mist hovering over the sea's edge? Perhaps he saw his past life, when at the age of one he first toddled up to the water's edge, fell flat on his face in the wet, shifting sand and howled fearfully, unable to get up. His mother Palaga ran up, gave him a smack on the bottom and took him home. But at the age of five he was living by the fishing nets, sucking salmon bones and fighting over them with a shaggy dog skulking by the table who also wanted his share. By ten he was working with his father, and after that life went on its way as it did for all the Krens who came from that stock. So now another one had died, Chrysanth. Did Mishka's heart miss a beat when it happened? Living alone in his den, worse than a wild beast, he had no one to learn it from. Perhaps the news had reached him somehow and today, hunched up more tightly on the whale's vertebra, some strange sixth sense, had reminded him not only of the huge beast sent to them by a happy stroke of fate, but also of his brother Chrysanth with whom he had caught the whale. How vividly he recalled that joyous, intoxicating day long ago I cannot say, but the circumstances were constantly in Chrysanth's mind, and as he related them to me his bushy brows would bristle, his long, black mouth grinned and he marvelled at his former courage and daring. For they got the whale almost effortlessly. It was a god-send, you might say. They had brought the mail by boat, and heard the gulls screaming. They thought someone must have drowned and the body had been cast up. So they went to the spot and saw the whale threshing its tail. Mishka Kren shouted: "God has sent us gold." The gulls had pecked the back, but the whale's jaws were still alright. They began to shoot with a rifle, but that was pretty useless. So they took their axes and hacked away until they dropped. The tide was coming in and the whale would soon be carried off out to sea. They bound its head with rope and thought that should hold it, but it kept threshing its tail, knocking them over like ninepins. Then Mishka waded into the water in the clothes he had worn in the town, his best jacket, and lassooed the whale's tail. It was like lassooing a deer. They tied it to the boat and dragged it along, but the boat was much shorter than the whale, so you can imagine how long the creature

was... When Mishka saw the whale he rushed into the water with only his head sticking out and cried: "God has sent us gold!"

The whale disappeared long ago. It was eaten up. And now Chrysanth has gone. The gold had been spent, frittered away, not bringing Mishka Kren any happiness. And now I am sitting on the last wrinkled vertebra which by some miracle has not been buried under the stormy sands. How strange that I am here and not in Sloboda, in that ravaged, lonely room where the black crepe has not yet been removed from the table on which the coffin stood so recently. Nastasia is probably not asleep. She'll be sitting outside on the birch block by the door. The day after tomorrow is St Elijah's Day, when God threw a piece of ice into the river, and the dusk is blurring the bushes. Here, on the sea shore, the air is still light and spacious. Only on the distant edges of the sky is there a leaden wall. It is from there that autumn will come... So many words are teeming inside me, that I feel sad and constricted. This sorrow of mine is from the unspoken words that melt and burn in my heart. They are what pains me. It is as if everything that happened recently has been erased. Well, nothing happened anyway, did it? Yet I have the feeling that everything happened, right down to the depths into which two people who love each other plunge and burn. And I no longer just dream, but believe, Nastasia, that I have known you for many years, perhaps forever, and have never left you.

Nothing happened, yet I am a new man, and it is strange that my unprepossessing shell is still the same one. A new man, a new man... To whom shall I confess, to whom shall I pour out my heart to be properly understood? As if endowed with special, piercing vision, I stare at the calm, swelling sea, and with my sick imagination I see you now, Nastasia, withdrawn and grieving, across the dumb expanses. And I see Serafima Anatolievna sitting on the bed. She is wearing the thin sports trousers and dangling her legs, like a teenager, her thin shoulder blades are moving like budding wings, and the whole of her body from the white head to the withered old heels is poised, ready to soar up over the bed.

*Archangel, 1977*

## Nikolai Kuzmin

# SWEET MOMENT OF SUCCESS

The man in front had a heavy, bulging rucksack on his back. His companion was carrying two pairs of downhill skis tied with straps. They walked in silence, hunched up, the second following in the leader's footsteps. The other two had no luggage. The journalist had borrowed some hiking boots and a smart warm anorak with a hood from friends. He climbed awkwardly, often skipping from side to side and hopping over patches of mud and rivulets of water, and was soon out of breath. The fourth, the surgeon, walked carefully, conserving his energy, like a person used to the mountains.

The two in front with the rucksack and skis turned off the slushy path onto a narrow track trodden deep in the wet snow. They continued to walk at a slow, measured pace, without looking round. The journalist stopped and waited for his friend to catch up. He kept tossing the anorak back from his shoulders, away from his burning cheeks, and shaking his head long-sufferingly, trying to breathe more deeply.

"Some climb..." he muttered, trying to calm his heaving chest. He glanced down at the distant, mist-enveloped town, then up at the muddy, winding path.

"Tired?"

The journalist put both hands on his chest and rolled his head.

"It hurts a bit."

"Two more bends," said the surgeon, without stopping.

He did not turn off after the two skiers, but walked

along the edge of the melting path, stepping in earlier tracks. Stretching out his arms to keep his balance, the journalist crossed the path to the snow and began to stamp and scrape his boots to get the sticky mud off.

When they reached the base, the skiers who had taken the other track were already there. They had removed their boots and were sitting on a low bench by the wall of a house, wiggling their bare toes in ecstasy. The earth had dried out a little in the sun, and the skiers' legs with trousers rolled up to the knee, were resting on their boots. Their socks were drying on the bench beside them. When the surgeon and the journalist walked past, stumbling in the water-logged snow, the skiers turned their heads lazily, but could not be bothered to open their eyes. The journalist looked back once or twice at them.

The base consisted of ten small slate-covered houses. In some the windows were wide open, and men were sitting on the window-sills, their legs inside, with vests wrapped round their heads, warming their strong, bare backs in the sun.

Out of the last house, which the surgeon was approaching, came a tall, sun-tanned, completely white-haired skier in bright-blue trousers drawn tight by the under-straps.

"Vadim Sergeyevich!" he said delightedly. "Why didn't you ring?"

"Hello, Sergei," the surgeon said wearily, shaking his hand. He took a deep breath, the first since he had set out, and removed his large sun-glasses.

The journalist stood to one side, waiting and getting his breath back. The surgeon beckoned to him.

"Meet our reporter, Sergei. He wants to write about the coming competition."

Anxious to get on friendly terms as soon as possible, the journalist bared his teeth and pumped the white-haired skier's hand. Neither the smile nor the lengthy handshake appealed to Sergei. He snatched his hand away abruptly and asked ironically:

"I expect you'll write the whole truth, with the inside story and predictions for the future."

"Maybe, maybe," replied the journalist with forced cordiality, ignoring the other's dislike for professional reasons.

Sergei turned away from him and touched the surgeon's elbow.

"It's funny, but for some reason everybody considers themselves experts on sport. No other field has so many connoisseurs!"

They walked up to the house, and Sergei waited while the new arrivals scraped the mud off their boots.

"Is he a nut case?" the offended journalist asked furtively.

"Tell you later," the surgeon murmured and went into the house.

"This way," called Sergei. "Straight on, then right. But you know where it is."

A young fellow with powerful arms, in a vest and knitted cap, was squatting on the porch, spitting from time to time in a bottle of polish and cleaning a huge pair of ski boots. He moved aside to let the journalist pass. The pompon on his cap hung down to his shoulder. The journalist admired the young lad's magnificent physique.

"A real Goliath!" he said, admiringly, in the corridor. "Did you see, Vadim?"

Sergei kicked open the thin, cardboard door.

"If you'd rung earlier, I would have got everything ready. Still, we can fix you up with a room straightaway. This one okay? Then I'll tell the lads to bring you some sheets."

"What's the snow like, Sergei? There's none left in the town."

"There's frost in the morning. The best time is from eleven to twelve."

"Have they cast lots yet?"

"This evening."

"Hope you get a lucky number."

Sergei went off quickly, saying he would drop in before the evening meal. The newcomers began to settle in. The room had three striped beds. Vadim Sergeyevich tested one to make sure it was firm, took off his anorak, spread it out and lay down. Then he shifted about, frowning, and placed his feet, still in boots, on the board at the bottom of the bed. For a while the journalist looked out of the window. A snow-covered slope began just by the house. High up the supports of the chair lift could be seen. The slope, the mountains and the gorge which

stretched past the base and further down were bathed in sunlight. At the very top of the slope, where the bright sky with its deep, glowing colours began, gleamed the crest of the pass. Down below, in the town, from the window of the smoke-filled editorial office, the journalist had often glanced up at its remote, unattainable, glittering height. From here the pass seemed a stone's throw away. It was clearly visible, covered with eternal snow. The fact that you could see this virgin age-old snow so clearly, made the pass seem even more unattainable than from below. The journalist thought of opening the window, but opened only the ventilation pane. The dry air made a pleasant pricking sensation in his throat.

There was a strong smell of ski oil and boot polish in the house. Probably all the rooms in all the houses had the same smell. Noting all this as the beginning of his future series, the journalist sat down on a bunk and leaned against the hot radiator, straddling plump legs in the clumsy boots.

"Hey, the heating's still on here."

His companion lay silently, his eyes closed.

"Listen, Vadim, is that him? The Sergei Maximov who skied in Italy? I remember some article about him and ... and that Austrian fellow, wasn't it? The one who got all the golds at the Olympics."

"That's him," the surgeon replied drowsily. "Sergei was in the national team. He had a bit of bad luck in Italy. Broke his leg. The Austrian gave him his goggles and cap."

"Was that when Ilio Colli had an accident?"

"About the same time..."

"Yes, I remember now. Has he still got the goggles?"

"Of course. They're a fine pair. Handmade. No one else has anything like them."

"That's a nice little touch," remarked the journalist, scribbling in his notebook. "You must put me in the picture, old boy. This isn't exactly my field. I've read a bit, of course, and picked up one or two things, but not much. I've got an idea about what I want to write, but I haven't got enough background, facts, details. See what I mean?"

"You'll pick that up tomorrow," Vadim Sergeyevich said sleepily with a slight grimace of displeasure.

The journalist noticed it and said huffily:

"Alright, I won't disturb you. You're all nut cases in this place!"

The damp mist that rose from the valley each night stopped half-way up to the base. A veil of heavy condensation hung over the town below, but the mountains remained clear all night, their jagged outlines vivid against the cloudless slate-coloured sky. Large bright constellations shone low over the houses. You could only guess at the distant town from the blurred patches of light.

"Let's stay here for a moment, if you don't mind," the journalist suggested, moved by the scene, zipping up his anorak and pulling on the hood. Drinking in the dry, frosty air, he gazed at the stars that seemed so close. Here, in the mountains, they looked larger than from below.

"Marvellous air, eh?"

Vadim Sergeyevich looked up indifferently, then yawned and waved his hand.

"I'm going."

The journalist trailed disappointedly after him.

"You know, old boy," he said, "you really are a bit..."

In the club, from which they had just emerged, the radiogram had been playing non-stop. The dancers wore crude, heavy boots, thick sweaters and tight-fitting pants. They danced slowly, gazing into their partner's eyes. There were two rather dim light bulbs without shades, and a haze of cigarette smoke under the low ceiling.

The surgeon chatted to Sergei, glancing now and then at the dancers. They had just drawn lots for tomorrow's competition, and Sergei, who had come to the club straight from the meeting of panel of judges, was not happy. Afraid that the spring sun would soon spoil the slope, which had frozen hard overnight, the judges had divided the competitors into two groups. The first consisted of those expected to do well. They would go first. Sergei had been put in the second group.

"Those damned officials!" he grumbled. "It'll be pure slush by then, not hard snow. I'd like to see them ski in slush like that!"

In the dim light Maximov's face looked as swarthy as an Indian's. His cheekbones stood out sharply, and his shock of white hair gleamed with a dull lustre. As he

spoke, he kept looking at the smoky throng in the packed hall, where an attractive couple of dancers was the centre of attention, a slim woman and a young fellow, screwing up his eyes from the cigarette between his teeth. The woman's thick curly hair was tied back with a wide ribbon and she held herself erect and composed. Her hands were on her partner's narrow boyish shoulders.

Vadim Sergeyevich gave the woman a friendly wave and then caught her sending impatient, worried looks in their direction.

"Who's that with Marina?" asked Vadim Sergeyevich, watching the dancing couple. "I don't think I know him."

Sergei took a good look.

"He's first-class. Got into the top ten at Cheget last year. In a year or two he'll be even higher."

"So there are some promising youngsters, eh?"

"I should say so! You'll see tomorrow."

"I'm rooting for you tomorrow."

"Oh," Sergei seemed put out again. "Nothing better to do?"

Gazing affectionately at the skier's swarthy, no longer young face tanned by the mountain sun, Vadim Sergeyevich did not notice the woman and her young partner stop dancing and come up to them.

"Couldn't find you anywhere, Sergei," announced the woman, giving a welcoming nod to the surgeon. "You disappeared into thin air."

"What are you talking about?" Sergei objected mildly. "I didn't disappear. I was drawing lots."

"Yes, and?" she broke off enquiringly.

Sergei hesitated.

"Well. Not so good, actually."

The woman laughed suddenly, took Sergei by the arm and pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

"So you're upset, eh? It's all for the best, darling, really. God must have heard my prayers. It's about time you thought about me and Maxim. Or he'll soon be calling you uncle. Hear me? Uncle."

"That's nonsense, Marina!" Sergei reproached her annoyed, with a swift glance at the surgeon. The young man standing nearby felt completely out of it.

"Why is it nonsense?" said Marina offendedly, looking at the silent surgeon and her dancing partner as if invit-

ing their support. "No, sweetheart, you've done your bit of skiing and now it's time to stop. It really is! How long are you going to go on? Vadim Sergeyevich, won't you tell him. It's time to call it a day. I'm tired. Tired out, as tired as I don't know what. Tired from the massaging alone. Look at my hands. Do they look like woman's hands? More like a rake."

"Marina..." Sergei stopped her with a warning note in his voice.

For a while they stared into each other's eyes. The dancers were looking at them too.

"Could we do without the family scenes?" Sergei said in a half-whisper.

Marina put her hands to her temples and shook her head slightly.

"Oh, how sick I am of all this! Come on," she turned suddenly to the embarrassed young man, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him off to the circle of dancers. "Come on, come on. I want to dance. Might as well enjoy myself if I must."

The boy cast imploring looks at the somewhat disconcerted Sergei, and they soon disappeared into the throng. Vadim Sergeyevich stole a glance at his friend. Sergei was looking down, biting his lip.

Their attention was suddenly attracted by a noise from the corner where the radiogram stood. A crowd of spectators was laying bets. One of the skiers had said that he could squat down one-hundred-and-forty times on one leg. This was usually challenged by inexperienced people who did not know that an exercise like that was not at all difficult for a well-trained downhill skier. Vadim Sergeyevich could see the sportsman's head bobbing up and down. Hands on hips and one leg stretched in front of him, a shock-headed lad was going up and down, up and down, effortlessly, like a pendulum, and the count was already over a hundred.

After watching for a while, Vadim Sergeyevich gave Sergei's shoulder a friendly squeeze, inviting him to forget about Marina's sudden outburst. Sergei sighed gratefully: "Hm, yes. That's the way things are."

In order to change the subject, he turned his back firmly on the dancers and started talking about the journalist, surgeon's companion.

"Can't stand that lot," he confessed, as if apologising for the poor welcome he had given the journalist earlier. "Just can't help it."

Vadim Sergeyevich looked down silently to show he understood and had not forgotten. It was a reference to an incident a long time ago when a newspaper correspondent reporting a competition abroad had explained the poor performance of the Soviet downhill skiers by saying they were afraid to ski on difficult Alpine super runs. Vadim Sergeyevich had read the report and knew how this unfair criticism had upset Soviet skiers. He was almost a permanent feature at skiing competitions. He had several times offered to act as doctor at the base, and was well acquainted with these reckless people who risked their health and their lives for the sport. Each training session, each practice run could end in a serious injury, if not in death, for the speed on the steep, bumpy and often icy slopes often exceeded 100 kilometres an hour. At competitions Vadim Sergeyevich had often hurried to the scene of the accident and put on a hasty bandage with splints. After a fall skiers were taken quickly to the town and there, in the operating theatre he spent a long time carefully setting the broken bones: the heavy equipment usually caused serious fractures.

The reporter writing about that competition had, of course, been superficial and hasty in his judgment. Nevertheless, as Vadim Sergeyevich realised, his report had touched upon a professional failing of downhill skiers. As a sober and impartial bystander, he had often seen the psychological consequences that could result from bad downhill falls. After treatment the skiers had to spend a great deal of time and effort to overcome the painful barrier within them and regain that inspired control of mind and body on the most difficult slopes. Often, too often, he had noticed how weak a person was—fear getting the better of all his striving.

The example constantly before him was the sad fate of Maximov, now dispirited by failure and no longer young, but once the happy rival of the most famous. Sergei "came a cropper" on the famous Stratofana, the Italian super course, just on the eve of the Winter Olympics when all the national teams were making their final selection.

The competition in Italy went down in history as a

"mincing machine": barely one quarter of the competitors had reached the finish. And the competitors were all top skiers! The rich holiday-makers who had gathered that winter in the fashionable Alpine resort were to see a thrilling, unforgettable spectacle.

Russian downhill skiers had never done very well abroad, and the Soviet team was painfully aware of the general contempt shown by the spectators. There was a noisy, cosmopolitan, rather dazzling crowd at the hotel where the competitors were staying. The spectators were always on the alert for famous skiers. The newspapers wrote a great deal about the French, Japanese, Italians and particularly about a mysterious Austrian who throughout his brilliant sporting career had always done his best to keep out of the limelight, thereby whetting the appetites of importunate reporters even more. The newsmen who flooded the mountain resort vied with one another in obtaining information about the life and habits of the unsociable Austrian. Only the Russians aroused no interest whatever. No notebooks flashed out or cameras clicked when they appeared.

One day, however, Sergei was stopped in the foyer by a Belgian reporter who was buzzing round the sportsmen. The Belgian was invariably accompanied by an elderly lady, who desperately tried to conceal her age and had an excruciatingly made-up face, on which the heavily lipsticked mouth stood out gruesomely like paper flowers on a coffin. The lady dressed so lavishly that the papers wrote as much about her outfits as about the competition itself. A Polish correspondent with a sense of humour had once referred to her as Madame Death, and this macabre nickname turned her into another celebrity at the resort.

Leaving his fur-wrapped companion for a moment, the Belgian called to Sergei and seized him by the hand with a forced bonhomie.

"Russian... Stalingrad... Verry goot!" he chanted, his eyes still darting inquisitively from side to side: the inhabitants of the luxury suites on the first floor were about to come down for lunch.

Over his shoulder Madame Death gave a gracious imitation of a smile on her bloodless face, nodding from her furs and showing her long, horsey teeth flecked with lip-

stick. She had just returned from a promenade. There were snowflakes on her elaborate hair-do and on the hem of her long silvery fur coat. As Sergei had already noticed, it was considered terribly chic to let a fabulously expensive fur coat trail along the ground.

This was the first time Sergei had been abroad and spoken to a foreign journalist, but he was not taken in by the apparently flattering attention of the media. If there had been more people in the hall, this sharp fellow would never have taken any notice of him, nor would his lady friend with the painted lips. It had been the same yesterday and the day before. They did not know the names of any of the Russian skiers.

Dropping Sergei's hand the Belgian immediately forgot all about him and minced back to his lady friend.

"Poor fellows," he said in English, not pronouncing the words quite correctly, and Sergei heard the unconcealed scorn in his departing words. "They'll only get in the fifth ten again."

Looking at the Russian skier's face, Madame Death replied in a stage whisper:

"Shush. I think he understood."

"Him?" The reporter looked round with a smile. "You must be joking, my dear."

The famous Austrian, champion and winner of many international events suddenly appeared in the hotel's huge revolving doors, and the reporter flew over to greet him as if skating on ice.

The champion was dressed in light running shoes, a sweater and a knitted cap. He was returning from his daily run. His homely face looked tired, as if after a hard day's work. Crossing the hall he replied to the persistent correspondent, who beamed with delight and jotted something down in his notebook. The newspapers were even writing about the champion's likes and dislikes. Everything about him was now common knowledge. The holidaymakers at the resort knew that each day, no matter what the weather, he always ran for about an hour. His route was from the hotel to the fountain of Our Lady, and back. The only skis he ever used were from the Kneisl firm. They even wrote about his gear: his mittens, jackets, pants, boots, and, of course, his goggles, which

were just as famous as he was, a present from a film star, or some other famous person...

The Austrian disappeared into the lift and went up. Sergei caught sight of his room-mate in the foyer, a young skier like him, also with high hopes for the future. This was his first visit abroad too and he had developed a craze for cigarette lighters. All his free time was spent wandering about the foyer and lounging in the bar, on the lookout for them. Pulling a handful of badges out of his pocket he would offer them insistently in exchange. "Kamrad," he jabbered, briskly pinning badges on the owner of the cigarette lighter. "Moscow... Souvenir!"

Through the revolving glass doors past the bowing commissionaire swept one of the inhabitants of the first floor suites, a short, arrogant, handsome man with a foppish moustache on his tanned face. His unbuttoned fur coat was flecked with snow—the weather was breaking. Madame Death and her escort exclaimed joyfully. The handsome man, who positively radiated health, took off his hat and went up to them. The smile behind the moustache and the friendly chat were for the lady, as an equal. Her escort received only a condescendingly outstretched hand. But the latter was grateful even for that. Madame Death asked for a cigarette and the handsome man brought out his lighter, while he went on smiling and talking.

At that moment someone tapped him casually on the shoulder.

"Kamrad! Souvenir!"

At first the handsome man was shocked and surprised. What did this ill-mannered, beefy young man want of him? The Belgian, who had already come across the cigarette-lighter fanatic, rushed to his aid. The handsome man's moustache twitched with distaste.

Unable to forget this distasteful twitch of the moustache and embarrassed in front of the commissionaire and everyone who was watching, not openly, but alertly from all sides, Sergei cursed to himself quietly and got up.

"That's enough of Kamrads, you idiot! Let's go to our room."

A look of utter astonishment appeared in the souvenir lover's bright-blue eyes. "But they're nothing to me, all these people. Why should I worry?" He shrugged his big beefy shoulders.

"You'd do better to check your skis," Sergei reproved him. "You were complaining about the metal edges in Moscow."

The lad gave a careless wave of the hand.

"Are you in a hurry to get to your own funeral? Remember what happened to Colli. He could ski circles round all of us. And look at the weather."

The competition at Stratofana was to open with the downhill event, and that day a gale of hurricane force blew up in the Alps. The temperature dropped to minus thirty. The *alpini*, the Italian mountain riflemen, lit big bonfires along the course in the shelter of the cliffs, and the smoke from the burning logs mingled with the driven snow sweeping over the icy slope. These drifts of dense snow compressed by the wind are called "blunt" by downhill skiers. They seem to be mixed with sand and they slow down your speed considerably, clinging to your skis. It was on a course like this that the well-known downhill skier Ilio Colli crashed into a huge pine tree on the eve of a competition, when he overlooked this slowing down effect on the "blunt" snow.

The accidents began when the first competitors were swept off the course by the hurricane. The spectators, who had gathered at the most dangerous stretches, shouted hysterically and greatly obstructed the doctors and rescue teams by their privileged curiosity.

The Japanese who won second prize flew down the slope with the recklessness of a *kamikaze*. By some miracle he managed to finish the course and afterwards, still in the heat of the crazy race, covered with snow and battered by the freezing wind, his lips blue with cold, all he could say to the reporters crowding around him was that in conditions like these skiing was "hara-kiri at the run". In the evening at the presentation ceremony he was quite different—elegant, polite and smiling, but even then, blinking from the camera flash bulbs, he announced firmly that his children would not be downhill skiers.

The competitor before Maximov was the beefy young souvenir-lover, the Dealer, as they nicknamed him in the team after the business with the cigarette lighters. A heavily built person always has an advantage in skiing downhill, a stronger start and a higher speed, and the Dealer was the Russians' only hope for any kind of de-

cent result. Yesterday at the meetings with the team leader he had vowed to do his utmost and not to let them down. He had bolstered up their hopes again today as well. The leader, coach, doctor and other team members had prepared him as if for battle. Encased in his heavy sporting armour he skied to the start like a loaded missile. It was strange to observe, after all his assurances of the day before and all the high hopes and preparation, what sort of start he made.

The Dealer was not happy about the advantages of his weight. No sooner was he on the course, than he sideslipped to reduce speed. And as soon as the first spray of snow rose from under his feet, gibes could be heard among the spectators. Sergei even thought that the foreign chatter contained references to the four large letters on the skier's jacket denoting his country. The Dealer remained true to form right up to the end. Not forgetting to reduce the breakneck speed by frequent glissades, he held on with all his considerable strength, afraid of the fast greedy slope down which the intrepid Ilio Colli had sped like a fireball towards his sad end recently. He stayed the difficult, lethal course, successfully negotiating the dangerous spots, but finished to the jeers, whistles and boos of the crowd.

Sergei heard and saw all this and awaited his turn, gritting his teeth. He realised that the Dealer had seen he had no chance of success and had not wanted to take unnecessary risks, for a fall might mean an injury, a long stay in hospital, and removal from the team, but remembering how the Dealer had reassured his team-mates the day before, how earnestly he had promised to justify their trust and not let them down, Sergei decided that such deception, such mean selfishness verged on treachery.

Right next to the start, their collars turned up against the icy wind, stood a group well known to Sergei. The handsome man in his belted fur coat was twitching his moustache and hunching his shoulders against the cold. The Dealer's performance had not even amused him. He had caught a cold and was bad-tempered, discourteously turning his back on the deathly mask of the indefatigable Belgian's lady companion; today, outside in the cold, the bluish pallor of her cold face seemed to justify her

nickname more than ever. The handsome man was fortifying himself with a silver beaker filled from a flask by the Belgian. Without removing his gloves he tossed it into his mouth, choked, blew into his moustache waiting for his eyes to stop watering, and stared at the skier with the large letters on his chest. After a short rest, the handsome man waved the empty beaker in the direction of the skier and asked something. The Belgian laughed, turned his back on Sergei and pointed down to the course where the Dealer's shameful performance had just finished.

"Bastards!" thought Sergei angrily. "Just you wait!"

The starter gave the signal. He set off so resolutely and immediately got up such a speed that the experts and everyone watching fell silent and wiped their glasses in amazement. On his crude, clumsy skis with pathetically primitive bindings, the Russian downhill skier with his intrepid courage reminded one of the last defenders of a besieged fortress. The laughter by the bonfires subsided and everyone hurried up to the course. Something far greater than the desire for a prize could be sensed in the Russian sportsman's behaviour.

Sergei fell at the spot where the most skilled and daring had fallen. But his descent on the Stratofana went down as a feat of great courage, and some well-disposed reporters drew a parallel with the bitter fighting of the early stage of Russia's great war against the Nazis. Only the Soviet correspondent in his brief report on the opening day of the competition wrote that of the two Soviet skiers who had started the course on the Stratofana only the Dealer had not done too badly, but Maximov did not even finish. And this malicious "even" hurt the injured sportsman more than anything else.

First place went to the Austrian as had been expected. A few days later, when the pestering reporters had left, he unexpectedly visited Maximov in hospital.

In Sergei's bright, sunny ward with a view of the snowy mountain slopes the Austrian found the whole Soviet team, who were leaving the next day for another competition in Switzerland. While the usual noisy exchange of pleasantries was going on by the door, Sergei had time to recover from his surprise and greet his famous guest calmly.

The champion was just as confident in the hospital ward as he was on the course. Casting an expert eye over the sportsman swathed in bandages and plaster, he drew a chair up neatly with one leg and sat down so that the injured man would not have to turn his head. On closer acquaintance he turned out to be a straightforward, sociable lad. They spoke in English, and the Austrian's somewhat clumsy efforts were those of a person who had learnt a useful language on a few short visits, in the noisy foyers of overcrowded hotels. Sometimes, searching for a word, he would blush like a schoolboy at an exam and click his fingers impatiently, waiting for someone else to produce it. His colloquial grasp was better, however, and he often used slang expressions that the Russian skier did not understand.

Sergei's first impression of the Austrian's homely face had not been wrong. His father, it turned out, was a worker. "A good worker," the Austrian stressed, holding up a finger. "Skilled," Sergei suggested, and his visitor nodded happily. "Yes, right!" He said that it was his father who had taught him to respect Russians. One day in the camp at the munitions factory where his father worked the Russian prisoners-of-war had attacked the guards with bare hands. They had nearly all been killed, but a few had managed to escape to the mountains. Later they had fought well in Italian partisan detachments. A great deal had been written about this in the papers...

The Austrian did not conceal the fact that he had been lucky. He was one of the few who had been fortunate enough to reach the top in sport. He had seized his moment of success. Was it talent? Perhaps. But he knew full well that to keep your place at the top you needed more than talent. All the time you must have a ... what was it? Yes, a routine! A strict routine all the time! Otherwise your luck would change. It was hard, but what else could you do? Sport meant good earnings, excellent earnings. If it weren't for his skiing, his family would be hard up. His father was old and disabled now. His little sisters were growing up. If he worked in a factory, even if he became a skilled worker like his father, he wouldn't earn a fraction of his present income. His skiing not only fed him and his own whole family, but enabled him to provide for the future. He won his prizes

on Kneisl skis. This was splashed over all the newspapers and it provided marvellous publicity for the firm. So it wasn't surprising that the owner of the firm had ... what was it?... a soft spot for him, eh? The Austrian winked and laughed. So that was how it worked, he sighed, he scratched their back and they scratched his.

Recently an inventor had come up with an original ski binding: when a skier fell his foot was automatically released. This reduced injuries at competitions to a minimum. If Sergei had had this automatic binding, he would have suffered only from the fall, which was nothing. By mutual agreement the Austrian had been the first to put the automatic binding on his skis and had confided the "secret" to a reporter in the hotel foyer, who immediately proclaimed it to the world. Marvellous publicity.

As the Austrian admitted, the firms in his country that produced skiing equipment bore him a considerable grudge. Their equipment was not bad, in fact, it was actually very good. But the French, their competitors, had offered him better terms, and for several years now he had used French equipment and sportswear only. The Austrians reproached him for letting down his country and being unpatriotic. But no one remembered those high-sounding phrases when his ageing father was given the sack, did they? Why? Had they forgotten? Alright, then he wouldn't strain his memory either. No, he wouldn't. Words are one thing, but... Without finishing, the champion got up and walked round the ward. Stopping at the window, he looked out at the slopes where some boys were weaving in and out of the slalom. Suddenly he laughed and shouted: "Good lad!" When he came up and sat down again by Sergei his face was clear and carefree again. As a boy he had spent days on end on the mountains. In their little town children began skiing almost as soon as they could walk. So the foundation for those victories on the most difficult modern courses had been laid then, when he was a child.

After a short pause, the Austrian looked Sergei straight in the eye and said he had watched his descent and his fall. Well, what did he like most about it? He thought the decision to take that damned bend where so many skiers had come a cropper at top speed was right,

quite right. You had to. If you wanted to win, you had to drive yourself to the limit all the time. Otherwise there was no point in taking up sport. People who were cowardly and careful were not real sportsmen, they were... And the Austrian used a short, slang word. Braking and decelerating were the real admissions of defeat in a mountain skier's work, and even if the Stratofana competition was nothing but acrobatics, each sportsman should inscribe a perfect line on the slope as he strove towards victory. But why had Sergei used such long skis for that run? What was his coach thinking of? In that weather on a course like the Stratofana you needed short elastic skis for quick manoeuvring. The reason why Sergei had lost speed and not taken the bend in good time was his heavy, clumsy skis! And ... he hoped his Russian friend would not be offended!—but he hadn't done anything like enough training. That was obvious right from the start! Hadn't he trained for a long time? And where actually had he trained for the competition? How many kilometres had he done? How many times had he covered the course in a training period?

Realising that his frankness might upset the Russian, the champion blushed and showered him with questions to cover up his embarrassment.

Sergei was not in the least offended, but did not hurry with his reply. The naive lad! How many times in a training period? Once! One single time! The team trained on a marvellous course, but to get to the top it took them several hours on foot, carrying their skis on their shoulders, in full gear. This took up most of the training period. And he asked how many times!

But Sergei could not bring himself to tell the whole truth.

Blushing because of his white lie, Sergei said nothing, but simply held up three fingers—three times.

"What?" the Austrian jumped up. "Only three times? Three? Is that all?"

It took him a long time to recover from his astonishment. No wonder the Russians were considered fanatics! With that sort of training and equipment it was, excuse the expression, sheer madness to compete on the Stratofana. Like attacking heavily armed guards with your bare hands! The best foreign skiers, the Austrians, the

French, the Japanese... The champion methodically ticked them off on his fingers. The Italians. Yes, the Italians too, because Ilio Colli was a brave, first-class skier! They all covered the course ten or twelve times in one training period. What a difference, eh? And all their strength went on mastering the technique of the descent. On that alone! They had no trouble in getting to the top. There were ski lifts, even helicopters, at their disposal. But in that case... Unable to add anything more, the Austrian simply spread out his hands helplessly. His eyes moved sympathetically over the dazzlingly white ward.

"What makes you risk your life so openly, if you don't mind my asking? Is business bad? Very bad, eh? Do you have any other training, apart from skiing?" he asked. "You speak English pretty well. Perhaps you studied somewhere? Did you go to college? Because all this..." he nodded at the skier's bandaged body, "will cost a lot of money."

"Don't worry," smiled Sergei, moved by his visitor's concern. He himself was already thinking that his recovery might prove to be a difficult business. What was more, he was afraid that after a fall like this... Now he was the one to snap his fingers, searching for a word. "Yes, yes," the Austrian finished for him. "A person who's nearly drowned gets afraid of water, eh? A person who's been knocked over by a car is afraid of crossing the road. The main thing is to overcome yourself!" So even if he had to give up skiing completely, Sergei went on, he would do something he had been planning for a long time. It was a very interesting and exciting venture. In the mountains where the Soviet team trained they badly needed a modern winter resort—with hotels, ski lifts and swimming pools. There were Alps up there, real Asian Alps! Then the boys would not have to walk up to the top. It was about time the Russians proved themselves in this splendid sport.

"So you're a builder, are you?" the Austrian interrupted him respectfully.

"An architect."

That was it. The visitor's lively young face clouded with disappointment. He had thought...

"I don't understand," he confessed after a short pause.

"Then why did you..." He did not finish, but simply waved at the ward, the bed and the patient in it.

"That would take a long time to explain," Sergei replied. He could not help being amused by the Austrian's disappointed face.

Throwing back the hem of his snow-white hospital coat, the visitor suddenly pulled his ski cap and goggles out of his pocket and placed them on the table. Sergei could not believe his eyes. Yes, it was the champion's famous goggles!

The Russian sportsman's surprise and delight restored the Austrian's sensa of superiority. Never mind, he laughed, this strict routine and these damned skis were not for much longer. He would compete in Spain—there were going to be some great prizes there—and in the Winter Olympics, of course. Then he would call it a day. No more skiing. He had received several offers from big publicity firms and even one to act in a film. Eventually he would probably settle down in Mexico, buy a hotel there and get married. Anywhere was okay, if you had money.

Sergei thought it was a pity that their nice, friendly conversation should end with this piece of unrestrained, childish bragging. He felt tired. It was a strange land and strange people. Everything was strange! Suddenly he wanted to go home, as quickly as possible. Even on crutches! Even on a stretcher!

It took Sergei longer than expected to recover after the Stratofana, and he did not compete for several years.

Next year the Winter Olympics were held and the Austrian, Sergei's visitor in the hospital ward, surprised the world by winning gold medals in all the downhill events. After this triumph he really did give up the sport and, according to the newspapers, retired in voluntary exile to some country or other where he devoted himself entirely to increasing his capital.

The Soviet sportsmen at the Olympics won the team victory. However, against the successes of the ice-hockey players, speed skaters and figure skaters, the performance of Soviet downhill skiers looked particularly weak. From press reports Sergei learnt that the Dealer, now firmly established in the Soviet team, had come forty-seventh.

"What a disgrace!" he muttered, shaking his head. He

handed the open paper to Marina. "Take it, please. I want to walk for a bit."

"Five minutes, no more," Marina warned, helping him to get out of the chair and putting his crutches into a corner.

Once a downhill skier herself and now the team's permanent doctor, Marina would not allow Sergei to despair and did what she could to bolster his confidence during the months of cheerless inactivity. After the long break they could hardly wait for the season to open. Marina assured him that he was just as well trained as he had been before the Stratofana business. But he hadn't been particularly well trained then, had he? What was more, Sergei could not forget the Austrian's warning about a person who had almost drowned being afraid of water. And so, although he appeared to be in excellent form, he performed very badly in the downhill, slalom and combined events. Marina did her best to stop this from sapping Sergei's confidence. Together with the team they set off for more competitions and ... more defeats. And so it went on from year to year. Marina was at her wits' end. But she realised in time what was happening to the skier, who had been brought down like a bird in flight, and was the first to ask the sensible question: why try to fight against his nature? And let's face it, he was no longer in his youth, the best time for sport. It was time to call it a day... Sergei was on his own now. Even when, traumatised and having learnt fear in that breakneck, fatal turn, he was still hoping for something, so he put up with the failures and went on with his strenuous, exhausting training.

"We haven't seen each other for a long time, Sergei," said Vadim Sergeyevich. "How are you ... how have you been keeping? Tell me everything."

"Oh, there's nothing to tell!" Sergei stared at the tips of his boots. "Listen, what do you call it in medicine? A split personality? I've got a little devil inside me who nags me all the time. You've no idea how he gets on my nerves. As soon as I leave the start he begins whispering: 'Slow down, brake, don't be an idiot!' He thinks that he's the real skier and that if I listened to him everything would have been okay ages ago. He's a diplomat, damn him, like the Dealer. And I keep giving him what-for and

telling him to shut up, to be quiet and get lost!"

"And ... does he?" asked Vadim Sergeyevich, tactfully trying not to show any special interest. He had known Sergei for many years and seen him in many situations, but he did not recognise him now.

"Sometimes he does and sometimes he doesn't," Sergei admitted. "But the effort I waste on him is terrible. Honestly. Because of him I just don't have enough strength to get me through to the finish. Or have the courses got longer? I can keep going for a minute or two, but then... But the main thing... The main thing is that I've got some brilliant insight now. Really! I can see and feel and know how I should take the course. All that experience which used to be lacking—I'm absolutely full of it these days. If only I'd had it then, you know? I'd have beaten the Austrian himself on one leg."

Vadim Sergeyevich smiled.

"If youth but had the knowledge and old age had the strength."

"That's it! And for some reason I imagine this beautiful, dignified old age, curse it, in the form of a ... let's say a woman I once knew. A loathsome mask with lascivious, thick lips, all painted and greasy, you know! Ugh! You won't believe me, but I feel as if that foul woman were hanging on my shoulder, weighing me down like a rucksack. What do you think it is? The last finish? Hang up your skis and retire on a pension? Surely I can escape from her once at least?"

Vadim Sergeyevich scratched his brow thoughtfully for some time, not daring to look into the flashing eyes of his excited friend.

"Sergei," he said slowly at last. "If it were up to me, I wouldn't let you ski tomorrow. Don't misunderstand me, but you shouldn't... It's dangerous for you. And in any case... You haven't been in the first ten for some time now, have you?"

"So now you'd even like to chuck me out of the second, would you? Go and lounge on a feather-bed and eat porridge, I'm fed up with porridge! I've still got a few teeth left!"

He was upset, offended.

The journalist appeared, slightly tipsy, with a shiny

face, and interrupted them, fussing about, jabbering and gazing soulfully into their eyes.

"Been getting together with the lads. They're first-class chaps, you know. Ever heard of a crazy song called 'The horse had angina pectoris.'

Still pale with emotion, Sergei turned away and nodded over his shoulder to the surgeon.

"I'm going."

"At least try and get a good night's sleep, Sergei. Hear me? The temperature's dropping. I can imagine what the course will be like tomorrow."

The two of them, the surgeon and the journalist, watched his retreating figure in silence. The sculptured, white head finally disappeared in a cloud of frosty steam from the door. Vadim Sergeyevich saw Marina break away from the crowd of dancers and run to the exit.

The journalist was bursting with impressions, and did not want to spend the evening alone. When they left the club he followed his friend in silence, but as soon as the base houses came into sight he reminded him:

"We've got a bottle."

The surgeon unexpectedly expressed agreement, and the journalist brightened up gratefully.

"You know," he started talking excitedly, running on ahead, "they have a world of their own up here. Their own stories, their own songs. Their own heroes—yes, yes. The legends they tell about that Maximov of yours! He may be a nut case, but he seems to be a really interesting one."

Striding along morosely in the darkness, Vadim Sergeyevich shrugged his shoulders.

"He's just an ordinary person, I would say."

Ignoring his friend's unsociability, the journalist ran ahead again, caught hold of him, rose excitedly on tiptoe and whispered confidentially.

"But what about the goggles? And the Austrian's cap? And all these years of trying to make a comeback after his accident and win a competition? It's wonderful material, old boy! Wonderful material! I can see it all! Understand? And feel it! It's a world of real he-men. Like knights at tournaments in the olden days. Eh? One speeds along and falls, and immediately his place is tak-

en by a second, then a third. And so on *ad infinitum*. Youth! Courage! Perseverance!"

"Yes," Vadim Sergeyevich agreed, stifling a yawn. "But don't forget that a person's life in sport is very short. Ten years or so. As soon as you get experience, your strength starts failing."

"That's even better. Even better! The constant struggle for youth! You can't understand it, old boy, you just don't feel it. Here, on top of everything else, there's plenty of tragedy too. Cowards, cripples, heroes who don't give a damn. Eh? Yes, it must all be written down."

Knocking the snow off his boots, Vadim Sergeyevich climbed up to the porch. He was completely unmoved by his companion's excitement. In the narrow corridor the journalist involuntarily fell silent. A guitar could be heard through the thin plywood wall.

*The skis have been left by the stove,*
*The mountain sun slowly sinks down.*
*March very soon will be over,*
*It's time we were leaving for home.*
*Grey cloud will cover the sky;*
*Sun in the mountains, goodbye!*

"Vadim," the journalist whispered in ecstasy. "Can't you feel? It's poetry! True romance!"

Vadim Sergeyevich lingered on the porch listening, but not to the song. He had recognised the tired voices of Marina and Sergei.

"You could have said all that when we were alone. Why make a family scene in public?"

"I'm sorry, Sergei. But I'm so fed up!"

"Yes," Sergei sighed. "Everyone's fed up. I'm the only one who's enjoying himself."

"Don't be spiteful, please. I just forgot myself. How are your legs today? Let's give them a massage. A light one won't hurt... By the way, I was offered a jumper today. A French one. Very nice and not too expensive. Do you mind?"

"That's the Dealer doing business again, is it?"

"Why should you worry? It's nothing to do with you."

Vadim Sergeyevich went into his room, felt along the wall, and pulled the light switch. The bulb hung from

a long flex. The journalist hurried up to his rucksack and began to rummage about in it.

"Is there a glass?" he asked, pulling out a bottle.

There was a glass on the window-sill. Vadim Sergeyevich sniffed it, then poured in some water from a jug, swilled it round and emptied it outside. The journalist was listening to what was going on in the room next door. There was the sound of metal scraping on metal. Vadim Sergeyevich explained that one of the sportsmen was filing the steel edges on his skis.

"Perhaps we could ask him in?" the journalist suggested, pointing to the bottle.

"Not on your life. Those boys are on a strict diet."

"Oh, just a drop! It's not football or boxing. Skiing down a bit of a mountain."

"A bit of a mountain..." In his anger Vadim Sergeyevich threw himself on the bed and propped his feet on the board. "Do you have any idea at what speed they ski down that bit of a mountain? The world downhill record is over one-hundred-and-eighty kilometres an hour. One-hundred-and-eighty! That's flying, almost free fall. Imagine what it must be like to fall at that speed. You are not only skinned alive by the ice, but your bones get smashed. Have you ever seen a pair of ski boots? And skis? Until recently those heavy weights weren't automatically released when you fell. Just try falling with a load like that on you. Your bones snap like macaroni. You can't imagine what a multiple fracture is like. The foot just dangles from a few threads."

"Steady on," the journalist said, pressing the bottle to his bosom. "You're telling me some real horror stories."

"It's a unique form of sport. The downhill skier must have a steel body and an electronic brain. Yes, don't snigger. A brain. Your 'strength, not grey matter' is no good here. You need a brain, and a brilliant one at that! The downhill skier has to solve thousands of problems, tactical, technical and purely psychological, all in a matter of seconds. Mere seconds! Do you have any conception of what a course is like at competitions these days? It's all bumps, potholes, ice, and the most hair-raising bends. Just try switching off for a fraction of a second. Not negotiating some bump or pothole. Anyway tomorrow you'll see for yourself."

"Still there are people who not only ski but also set up records. Take Toni Sailer or that last one ... Jean-Claude Killy."

"Yes, but they're the champions! Winning all three combined events at the Winter Olympics isn't peanuts, you know."

"Who says it is, old boy?"

For a while the journalist said nothing, shaking his head and listening to the monotonous scrape of the file next door. He was holding the bottle in his hand.

"Like before a battle, eh?"

"This is the last competition. It's spring already in the town."

"Shall I pour you a big one?"

"You drink on your own first. I'll have some later."

"No, none of that! Here you are. I've only given you a drop."

"Well, your good health."

The journalist watched him drink it down and smiled.

"I was just thinking, what a long time it is since we got together, old boy. You've changed a lot. You look exhausted."

"Oh, it's nothing."

The journalist poured himself a drink carefully and was about to knock it back, when he suddenly stopped and held the glass on a level with his eyes.

"I wonder..." he murmured, twirling the glass slowly in front of him. "I've just been watching that Sergei of yours. He's got a tanned face, a fine-looking head and completely white hair. He must be getting on, isn't he? Eh?"

"He's our age. Thirty-six. Thirty-five maybe. Or perhaps thirty-seven or eight."

"Know why I'm asking? I was told today that it's high time he gave it up. But he still goes on..."

"He's as strong as an ox. I like him. He's a real sportsman."

"But he hasn't had much of a career in sport apparently. In fact he doesn't seem to have achieved anything at all."

"Career!" Vadim Sergeyevich smiled wrily. "What do you mean 'hasn't achieved anything'? He's achieved something that you could wish everyone! It's not only

the medallists that are important in sport, my friend. There are only a handful of them, but there are millions of sportsmen. And even if most of them never get a single medal, each of them wins a race one day that is important for him alone. And it is these apparently insignificant victories that make sport important."

"Yes, but what will remain after him? And after all those people like him. A track in the snow? But that's no different from a bird's tracks. The track of a gull or an albatross. Just a nice moment. A flash in the pan and nothing else."

"Why a flash in the pan? A pretty flash! Then what is a sport? Why do these people torture themselves training, why do they race downhill to what some jokingly call their own funeral? The winner in sport is the one who does not hold back, does not give way to fear, depression, even old age. Yes. And these victories are the most important ones."

"Oh, well, yes. Of course, I understand all that. That's elementary, old boy. I mean something else. Take Sergei as a concrete example, his life, his hopes when he was young and what he is now... Quite frankly, this is the end. The real finish."

They were quiet for a moment.

"But it's still sport," Vadim Sergeyevich objected. "Just wait. You'll see for yourself tomorrow. Tomorrow should be very interesting. You'll see."

"You're hoping he will win, are you?"

"What does 'win' mean? It's important that he shouldn't lose. That's why people respect him. And people like him should be respected."

"How I'd love to write this all down, damn it! Properly! I can already see how it would fall into place. Understand? I can see and feel it. No, you don't know what I'm talking about. You're a person ... without feelings. A dry, efficient stick-in-the-mud. Bogged down in your appendixes and fractures. Important enough, of course ... but not the main thing, old boy. Not the main thing."

The nocturnal seclusion, the wine and his companion's cordiality had elated him. He wanted to denounce and repent. Now that he had encountered this world of people who lived by daring, risking, striving for great things,

he felt for the first time that his own life was too petty and uninteresting, concerned with everyday trifles, with acquiring material things. He had wanted a flat in the centre of town, and got one. He had taken a lot of trouble to get a minor collection of essays published, and it looked as if he would be successful at that too. Now it wouldn't be a bad idea to get some new furniture... He had had affairs, occasional and secret sin on the side, and felt conscience-stricken afterwards towards his long-suffering and ageing wife. Sometimes he and his old friends would meet and settle down with a carafe of vodka and some salted herring with raw onion, then staring at one another with glazed eyes, they would bellow drunkenly, ecstatically and out of tune: "It's bad luck, old chap, if you meet a black cat..." Somehow it was all wrong. It lacked something ... real.

He caught himself in time and said nothing to give away his mood. He grabbed the bottle and sloshed the wine into his glass, but sipped it carefully and slowly, and for a long time afterwards sat thoughtfully, scratching himself and blinking, gradually regaining his composure.

"You were quite right to bring me with you, old boy. It's a different world up here, not like the one we live in down there. Yes, I noticed it at once. Take that Sergei of yours. He's the same age as me, but just compare us, take a look at me. See!" With the bottle and glass in his hands the journalist turned and lifted his elbows, showing his overweight body and the jacket he could barely do up. "Gone to seed! I've been thinking a lot today. Even on the way here. By the way, did you notice how those two in front of us were walking? You don't pay attention, old boy! That's your trouble. But I wasn't talking about that... What I'd like to do now is send everything to the devil, lock myself away and get down to some real writing. See? Not see or hear a soul, and write something big. A novel! About man. Eh? Only it would never be published."

He was about to drink again, but decided he'd had enough and put down his glass.

"Why don't you say something, old boy? Are you upset? Tell me what's she matter. Get it off your chest. I can see you're not your usual self. I can feel it."

Vadim Sergeyevich tugged the end of his nose thoughtfully.

"Listen, have you ever wanted to write about a person who longs to walk? Just to walk. On his own two feet."

The journalist snorted.

"Like Maresiev, the pilot who lost his legs and returned to active service with artificial limbs? Eh? Ah, you've been spoilt by the classics, old boy. It's the twentieth century now, my dear man. The reader of today wants you to grate on his nerves. See? So I'll go and write a play! Eh? Without any heroes. What do we need heroes for? Just a woman sitting on the stage chatting down a telephone. A woman and a telephone. That's all. See? For example, a woman like that Marina... Or even better—just a tape recorder. Someone's got the tapes mixed up. They're all cut and muddled up—a real Bacchanalia. And the fragments are played back. Someone else's life—in bits and pieces. The most absurd bits, awful and funny. Get it?"

Carried away he kept giving the surgeon conspiratorial looks as if he were a partner in crime.

"One of my patients at the clinic is a designer," said Vadim Sergeyevich after a short pause. "He came in after a car accident. A brilliant specialist. Even won a prize. But his legs are paralyzed and there's no hope of recovery. Yes. He sits for days on end in a wheel-chair on the balcony looking at the mountains. He and I sometimes talk. 'Do you know where I want to go most of all, doctor?' he says. 'Do you think it's to the theatre, or a restaurant, or even to the mountains? On my own two feet. I haven't been to the toilet for two years.'"

"Hey, that's marvellous!" exclaimed the journalist. "What a fantastic detail! Can you imagine how I could use that? No, of course you can't. How much you must see and observe, if only you put it all down. For goodness sake, why are you all so unenterprising? Are you just too lazy to sit down and write? *Tempus fugit*, you know. No, I'll be damned if I don't come and see for myself. Only don't go complaining that I stole it all from you. Okay."

"Is there anything left in the bottle?" asked Vadim Sergeyevich.

"In the bottle? Plenty. Shall I pour you some?"

"Pour yourself. You'll probably want to go on celebrating when you've finished it, won't you?"

"Well, yes ... actually ... I was thinking of it. So what?"

"Turn the light off when you go out, please. And make up your bed first, so you don't make a noise later. I want to get a good night's sleep."

"I say, old boy..." The journalist raised his fat shoulders in annoyance. "You're becoming a real old stick-in-the-mud. Damn it! A real killjoy."

Vadim Sergeyevich looked at him and laughed. Leaning over from the bed he caught him by his jacket.

"Don't be angry. It's just that I've had a terrible week."

The journalist went on muttering for a bit, then recovered. He did not bear grudges.

"As if we all have it easy. Take a look at that Sergei of yours. He's just as old as you are. But you're determined to act the old-age pensioner."

"Render unto Caesar..." Having reassured his friend, Vadim Sergeyevich threw himself back on the pillow and gave a long, luxurious yawn. "I had a good talk with Sergei today, by the way, about a split personality. Here's another fantastic detail for you, as you call it. Try to imagine that inside each of us is a little person. And at all the difficult moments in your life he suddenly sticks out his head and gives you advice and instructions on what to do. And everything depends on whether you can make him shut up or whether you let him take over from you."

"Not bad," the journalist brightened up. "I can use that. That'll fit in nicely. A smart, up-to-date touch."

"Well, have a go then. Write something."

"Now then, steady on! Have to think it over first. It's not that easy... Not like removing an appendix."

For a long time they said nothing. The bulb shone on the long flex. Snuffling slightly, the journalist drew patterns with his finger in the split wine on the table. The warm jacket did not meet on his stomach.

"I'm going to sleep," Vadim Sergeyevich turned to face the wall and settled down comfortably. "Good night."

The journalist sat for a little while longer, staring at his wet finger, then leaned heavily on the table with both

hands, lifted himself up, and pulled his jacket round him.

"I wonder if the dancing's still going on, eh?"

He waited. The surgeon lay still, without replying.

"Oh, alright then." And out he went, treading noisily.

In the corridor he stretched out a hand, without going back, groped along the wall and turned out the light. Then he put his head on one side and listened. The quiet melancholy singing to a guitar was still coming from the room at the end of the corridor.

*The trains whistle somewhere below,*
*Soon March will be with us no longer.*
*A single pale star is aglow,*
*Somewhere an avalanche thunders.*

With an habitual movement he pulled out his notebook, opened it cautiously, as if afraid of disturbing the singing, and looked for a place to settle down. It was uncomfortable writing with his notebook in mid-air, so eventually he leaned against the wall. Shaking his pen frequently to stop the nib from drying, he became totally absorbed in his writing and went on for a long time, until the club closed and the sound of stamping feet and noisy, young voices was heard on the porch...

Cheerfully trumpeting a march and beating his stomach, the journalist marched loudly round the room.

"Get up, sleepy-head! Get up, lazy-bones!" he shouted to his companion, clomping with his feet. "' I come to thee with greetings, to say the sun has risen...' That's enough lazing about. Up you get!"

Throwing the blanket off his face and screwing up his eyes, Vadim Sergeyevich for a long time could not make out what was happening. The journalist was marching round the table in his vest and trousers. His white, puffy arms were wet.

"Marvellous morning, old boy! I've been up for ages. Just had a wash in the snow! I really recommend it. Wakey, wakey!"

"Well, I never..." muttered Vadim Sergeyevich, putting his hand under the pillow to get his watch and breathing heavily from sleep.

The journalist sat down on the edge of his bed and said animatedly:

"Did you notice that Bucephalus, that Goliath, that Hercules on the porch yesterday? Yesterday, when we arrived? I've just got to know him. He's travelled all over Europe, you know. Been absolutely everywhere. All the famous winter resorts. The Alps! The Mediterranean! That's the life, eh?" And he set off clomping round the room again, trumpeting and marching. His fat belly, flopping over his trouser belt, ran down into broad, flat thighs.

Vadim Sergeyevich lay in bed looking tired, yawning and striking his bare chest.

"That Goliath promised to take you and me up by the chair lift. We'll watch it all from the starting post. Get up! Everyone else was up ages ago."

"We'll get up there without him, without your benefactor."

"Now then, old boy. Keep your bad temper to yourself. This isn't the place for it. And what a morning... Just take a look!"

Throwing back the blanket, Vadim Sergeyevich lowered his bare feet.

"Move the stool, please," he asked, beginning to get dressed.

"We had a nice chat. I've even jotted some of it down already."

Shaking his head and yawning, Vadim Sergeyevich laced up his boots.

"You'll work it all out for yourself... Just learn to keep your eyes open."

"That's insulting advice, old boy."

"Oh, yes. Preaching to the initiated!" Vadim Sergeyevich laughed and suddenly jumped up, making some energetic movements with his arms, and looked interestedly out of the window. The majestic colour of the mountain-side under the bright blue canopy of the heavens met his gaze.

"Yes, it's a fine day alright. But cold. I can imagine what's happening on the slope."

"There are crowds of people on the slope. 'Sun Valley Serenade'."

"That doesn't interest me in the slightest."

They were the last to have breakfast. Bending low over his plate the journalist hastily forked up slippery pieces of cold macaroni. Before taking a bite of bread, he wiped his lips with the slice.

"Have you noticed what the mountains are like today?" he said with his mouth full. "Marvellous lighting! All this makes you realise how much you have missed in life, damn it! Perhaps it's not so bad being bourgeois after all, eh? That Bucephalus was telling me: marvellous resorts, with a very select crowd. Film stars. There's skiing up top, but in a few minutes—whoosh—and the funicular whisks you down to the beach. And you can swim to your heart's content."

Vadim Sergeyevich reached for his compote and said nothing.

"Listen, old boy, I've been offered a marvellous sweater. A French one. But it's damned expensive... Look what I've got here. Isn't it great?" He took out a ballpoint pen with the picture of a woman on it and began to tip it first one way, then the other, which made the woman dress and undress. "There were playing cards too. Like this, you know ... with pictures. But someone else snatched them up! And a cigarette lighter. Would you like it? A very unusual one!"

Drinking the remains of his compote, Vadim Sergeyevich gave him a mocking look over the rim of the glass.

"That's thanks to the Dealer, or Goliath as you call him, is it?"

The journalist looked embarrassed.

"What difference does it make to you? So you don't want it, eh? Well, I'll take the sweater. Damn the price."

The sun had already risen when they left the canteen. From the slope above they could hear the even mechanical hum of the chair lift. Small, brightly coloured figures of skiers were whizzing down the slope, far above them. Many were going up now, all in the bright uniform of close-fitting pants and jackets.

The mud that had frozen in the night was beginning to melt, and their feet slipped on the hummocks. But higher up, just behind the houses, was the frozen snow, as hard as asphalt. A well-trodden path led from the houses in the base to the chair lift. The inexperienced journalist began to walk too fast, but Vadim Sergeyevich stopped

him, and they both set off slowly, one behind the other, keeping in step with the skiers. Everyone going up was carrying skis strapped together. The sharpened metal edges sparkled in the sun. The skiers trudged along the path, monotonously moving their feet clad in huge, clumsy boots.

The journalist was getting out of breath. He walked off the path and stopped.

"Hey, old boy. Is it here that they get up that fantastic speed?"

Vadim Sergeyevich raised his dark glasses and looked round.

"No, it's about eighty kilometres here. The worst is higher up. Over there is the Camel. You can't see it very well from here. See that mound? But that's still not the worst... On snow like today it's dangerous on the Joint. Particularly in the Funnel. See that bend up there and the drop? It's very steep there, almost sheer. That's where it's fast. That bit's like the Stratofana. Everyone's afraid of it."

"That's interesting." The journalist stared up at the slope, shading his eyes with his hand. "You must repeat all this again later. The Camel and the Funnel. Are they code names?"

"They're our names for them."

"I'd love to have a go, just once, eh? Just imagine! I never went in for heroic things like that. Running or swimming. Never even had a single fight! Just think. 'Those born to slither cannot fly.' But how exciting it must be, damn it."

They fell silent, standing aside to make way for Marina and her partner of yesterday. The lad was dressed in skin-tight black pants with orange stripes. He was carrying heavy skis and bore an aloof expression. In his mind he was already on the course, calculating the best way of negotiating it in today's weather. Marina walked behind him, carrying nothing. Her hair was tucked into her cap, her face half covered by glasses. Looking at her close up, the journalist could see the dark even tan on her cheeks and neck.

Vadim Sergeyevich nodded silently to her and she slowed down.

"What's the matter with you? Get a move on."

He nodded towards his companion and spread out his hands with a smile. Marina stopped and looked at the journalist taking a rest.

"What about Sergei?" Vadim Sergeyevich asked. "Is he up there already?"

"Been there for ages."

"How is he? Did he sleep?"

"Pretended to. But I can tell... Just look at the course today." She glanced at the dense, frozen slope. "They'll fly down it like stones."

"It's not his turn yet. It won't be so bad by then."

"We'll see." She sighed and set off again.

"What were you talking about, eh?" the journalist came up at once. "Anything special?"

He had been beside himself with curiosity during their conversation.

"Nothing much." Vadim Sergeyevich turned away and continued the climb.

The quiet, measured procession of people carrying skis was endless. Nobody hurried and nobody talked. Silent, in their bright tight-fitting suits, their faces concealed by goggles, the skiers looked like the inhabitants of another planet who did not know the language of this one.

Somewhere about half-way the journalist stopped again and looked down. The houses at the base were getting smaller and smaller. He had no glasses, and the sun was beating mercilessly into his eyes. His hangover made itself felt in palpitations and a foul taste in his mouth.

The broad-shouldered Dealer strode swiftly along the side of the path overtaking the silent skiers. He was carrying his skis effortlessly on one shoulder. Drawing level with the journalist, he slid his goggles onto his forehead and gave a friendly wave of his mittens.

"You'll be late... Hello, Vadim Sergeyevich. Don't you recognise me?"

"Hi there," the surgeon muttered, barely looking up, his shoulders swinging regularly in time with his feet.

The Dealer went on ahead, his boots crunching the crisp snow.

"Do you know him?" asked the journalist in surprise.

"A little."

"You weren't very friendly."

"Don't like the fellow," replied Vadim Sergeyevich curtly, saving his breath.

The journalist suddenly shook his head and began gasping for air. He just managed to touch his companion's shoulder. Vadim Sergeyevich stopped patiently.

"You shouldn't talk so much at such a high altitude," he said reproachfully.

For about two minutes the journalist stood there with a terrified expression on his face. There was no one else behind them.

"It'll pass in a minute," said Vadim Sergeyevich.

He looked up. There was not far to go now to the chair lift.

The journalist got his breath back at last and felt his chest gingerly.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to supply some transport here, damn it. This is the way to get a heart attack."

"There's a big building project starting next year. Ski lifts right from the hotel, and several lines of cableway. Even some swimming pools."

"That sounds alright," the journalist smiled. "A modern resort, eh? But did you see Goliath striding along, old boy? There's a heart for you. And what about the rest of him?" He indicated the size of his shoulders and chest.

"Wait till you see him in action," Vadim Sergeyevich said contemptuously.

"Why? Is he a coward?"

"He's a play-safer. Everything has its play-safers. This one's in sport. Shall we go now?"

"Wait a minute. I don't quite understand. Do you mean he's not keen to become a champion?"

"Why should he be? He might become a champion, but he might have a fall instead. And the chances of having a fall are a hundred times higher. So he takes the easy way out. The trainers like having him in the team. He's good at getting points and he never falls. That explains his visits abroad and all the rest of it."

"Well, not everyone can be a champ, old boy. You said yourself that there's only one medal and lots of people after it."

"But if everyone was like him there wouldn't be a Chkalov, or a Tolstoy, or ... who else ... a Yesenin, or a Ga-

garin. And nobody would have dared to do a heart transplant yet."

"Oh, you're taking it a bit too seriously, old boy."

"But sport is a serious business. I mean real sport, of course. And if you want to write anything worthwhile, you must get all those sweaters, and cigarette lighters and pens with naked women on them out of your head. And remember that that young fellow and everyone else who represents our country abroad has its name in big letters on his chest. There's your main detail and background."

"Steady on, old chap," the journalist objected mistrustfully. "You're going a bit too far... That's almost the Kursk Salient all over again!"

"Well, I think that whatever a person does he should do it wholeheartedly, not always weighing the pros and cons. Otherwise no good will ever come of it. And if I were you I'd... But that's your business. Write how you like. Have you had a rest? Let's go."

Setting off after his companion, the journalist asked:

"Does he always ski like that—playing safe?"

"Of course. People like him think that youth is given to us to provide for our old age. They're the ones who get on in sport."

"So he's afraid of old age too?"

"N-no, I don't think so. He's got nearly everything he wants. Goliath has got a car and a luxurious apartment. They say he's building a country house. And as for trips abroad, he'll probably have even more of them."

"But in what capacity? What do you think he'll do afterwards?"

"Become some sort of official, of course. Or perhaps a coach. I wouldn't be surprised if he wrote a thesis."

"Surely not a coach!"

"Yes, that's the trouble with us, I'm afraid."

They had just enough strength to climb onto the hill where the cableway began.

"Old age is no joy, indeed," muttered the journalist, puffing and panting.

It was crowded and lively here. A long, brightly-coloured queue of people stretched up to the chair lift. Many of them were wearing skis.

The engine of the chair lift rumbled as chairs suspended from a thick cable swung continuously out of a large brick

shed. The seat caught up the skier gently and bore him aloft towards the sun-drenched pass. Along the full length of the cable, as far as the eye could see, there were people suspended in the air. The seats returned empty.

The spectators had gathered along the slope, particularly near the most difficult stretches. Some were hoping to get a lift up to the start and stood shyly in the same queue as the skiers, distinguished from them by the urban sloppiness of their dress. The skiers from above raced right up to the chair lift without reducing their speed, braking dramatically at the very last moment and spraying the people in the queue with dry snow whipped up by their skis. After arresting their flight, they raised their goggles, and for a moment their eyes retained the remote expression of birds that had fallen from the heavens.

A cloud of snow spray suddenly enveloped the journalist and Vadim Sergeyevich. It was Sergei, completely unrecognisable in his cat-suit, breaking his flight at their very feet. His face was concealed by a pair of huge dark goggles, the famous Austrian ones given to him by the champion.

"Morning! How did you sleep?" he shouted, as Vadim Sergeyevich and the journalist dusted the snow off themselves. "Come on and I'll let you through. Otherwise you'll be hanging around here all day."

"What's the slope like?" asked Vadim Sergeyevich.

"Very fast. Nightmarish in the Funnel."

"You shouldn't waste your energy before the race."

"Oh, come now. I had to get an idea what it was like."

"I hope you'll be sensible today, Sergei."

The skier grinned. His white teeth shone against his dark energetic face.

"We'll see how it goes, doctor. The slope may be alright by the time it's our turn. I hope I can count on your services if need be?"

"That's no joke," Vadim Sergeyevich replied angrily.

"Hurry up, come on!" Sergei began to work his way through to the chair lift, his lithe, youthful body slipping easily through the crowd.

His authority was obviously considerable, for they were let through without the slightest comment.

"Wait a moment. How does this work?" squealed the journalist, gazing panic-stricken at the approaching seat. There was laughter in the queue of skiers. "Take hold of the bar with your left hand," shouted Sergei. Before he had time to say anything else, the seat hit the journalist behind the knee. He caught hold of the metal bar with all his might and felt the seat lifting him up.

"Whoops-a-daisy!" he exclaimed delightedly, kicking his legs. The seat gave slightly under him, scraped off along the snow and then swung upwards, gradually gaining height.

"Marvellous!" shouted the journalist, turning round.

Sergei and Vadim Sergeyevich exchanged condescending looks.

There was a drop of about twenty metres below him. The sensation of floating in the clear frosty air and the leisurely jolting of the seat frigthened the journalist at first, and he clung to the metal bar for dear life. His legs were dangling over an abyss. Far below him, disappearing into the gorge was the slope gleaming like mica, and very uneven with bumps and gullies. Glancing down he saw that the hardworn slope of the course retained the bluish tinge of the deep crack in the ice—evidently from the morning brightness of the young, spring sky.

Magnified by the loudspeakers, the voice of the judge at the finish filled the whole expanse of the charming, picturesque valley as far as the sun-drenched pass. The journalist heard an insistent whistle from behind. Without letting go of the bar, he turned round cautiously. About fifteen metres behind him was Vadim Sergeyevich, leaning back casually in his seat. He was urging him to look at something up above and to one side. What was he going on about? The journalist glanced up and gasped with delight: the solitary figure of a skier was already speeding down the course.

The slope was flooded with dazzling sun. In the brilliant streams of light, the skier tried desperately to keep his balance, struggling against the wild, uncontrollable force of speed, against the hand on the judge's stop-watch, and against the constant treachery of the ruthless slope that cast him from bump to gully like a stone falling down a crevice. He was completely alone on the steep, endless slope, a living creature on slim, tense legs, his

brain reacting instantly and his thumping heart frantically pumping his boiling blood.

As the skier past flashed under his seat and away, a threatening rumble of the skis on the icy slope reached the journalist. Completely forgetting his nervousness, he leaned over the side of the seat to see how the skier would negotiate the mysterious and terrible Funnel about which Vadim Sergeyevich had warned him. He did not! Straining bravely forward, the sportsman bent almost double and disappeared behind the hill, but a few moments later fragments of broken skis flew up and a somersaulting body came into view. The skier rolled for about seventy metres before coming to a halt. The rescue team rushed up with a sledge, followed by the doctor who kept slipping as he ran.

The full, resonant voice on the loudspeaker announced the fall indifferently: number so-and-so had left the course.

At the top, where first the journalist, then Vadim Sergeyevich jumped off the seats, was the panel of judges. The competitors set off at regular intervals. A warmly dressed man in felt boots and a cap held a flag by the skier's chest until a voice from the loudspeaker below announced: "Ready at the finish." Then the judge by the telephone shouted "Attention", and the man in felt boots removed the flag, leaving the way open.

Next Sergei jumped down from the seat and skied gracefully up to the start, drawing on his mitten as he went. Skiing round a group of waiting competitors, he braked suddenly and skilfully with a flourish. A small spray of churned-up snow rose from beneath his feet.

"I do like those flourishes in the snow," the journalist whispered excitedly. "They're so photogenic!"

"Yes, they are pretty," Vadim Sergeyevich agreed. "But it's better to do without them. Braking means reducing speed."

"What a pity. They're so nice to look at. Aren't they?"

"Let's be quiet now."

The Dealer was standing at the edge of the course, the ends of his thick skis suspended over the slope, waiting for the starting signal. Hunching his massive shoulders as if from the cold, he kept adjusting his goggles, which made him brush against the flag that the man in felt

boots was holding across his chest. There was a delay while the voice over the loudspeaker introduced the well-known sportsman to the spectators: he had taken part in the Olympics, won the national championships, and competed in the recent memorial in the French Alps. The Soviet team had flown from France straight to the present competition here, the last of the season.

Hearing the starting signal at last, the Dealer pushed off powerfully with his sticks, and the journalist was amazed at how his heavy skis with their steel edges came to life and sped downwards, cutting into the sparkling, hard ice with their steel edges. The slope caught hold of the sportsman and carried him along. Soon the journalist saw the snow whirling madly behind the tense, broad back. The skier bounced on a hummock and lost contact with the slope, but by instinctively balancing his arms, sticks and back, he landed on the ski again and began to prepare for the bend.

"Not bad," remarked the journalist with the air of an expert.

"He'll slow down before the Camel," Vadim Sergeyevich muttered through his teeth.

And indeed, at the point where the worn ribbon of the course sped up into a whole system of untidy little hills, snow sprayed up from under the sportsman's skis.

"Started mucking about," a skier by the start said scornfully. "He'll sweep all the snow away."

"That one won't go flying."

The journalist moved up to his companion.

"He doesn't seem to be very popular, eh?"

"Only natural," retorted Vadim Sergeyevich, not taking his eyes off the skier.

The Dealer's reduced speed enabled him to negotiate one of the most tricky stretches safely. Even so he was almost thrown forward on the steep hump of the Camel. It took all the strength of his steely, well-trained body to keep his balance and not fall. After this the Dealer proceeded with extreme caution, lavishly adorning the slope with jets of snowy spray, and only on the straight run to the finish did he start using his sticks feverishly to make up time.

"Safe and up to the standard," came the comment from behind them on this careful performance.

"Well, I liked it," said the journalist defiantly. "I think he did well. And whatever you say, his is the best result so far. Isn't it?"

Not wishing to get involved in an argument, Vadim Sergeyevich shrugged his shoulders evasively. He could have agreed that with a few more falls by the competitors still waiting at the start this sensible, cautious skier would be the champion. But that would be an accident, a gross injustice, because as a rule it took not only the grim, single-minded determination that they had just witnessed, to become a champion, but also artistry, inspiration, the urge to feel the finishing tape on your chest. The sweet moment of victory demanded passion, self-oblivion, a readiness to sacrifice years of strenuous work. Only then would sport as such survive, only then through the fate of the brave Ilio Colli would man arrive at the brilliant victories of Sailer and Killy who collected all the golds at the Olympics.

"Let's see what happens," Vadim Sergeyevich refused to be drawn into conversation.

The journalist did not fail to note his companion's irritation. He fell silent and moved away. What followed made him regret his sceptical mistrust, however, and reach for his notebook. A miracle had happened on the mound where the sensible and cautious Dealer had almost lost his balance. The skier shot forward there with such force that he did a somersault in the air, hit his back against the slope, bounced up again like a ball and, to his great astonishment, landed on his feet, his skis. The descent continued, the loudspeaker was silent, and the spectators standing motionless at the top looked at one another in amazement.

"Never seen that before!" admitted Vadim Sergeyevich, pale with excitement.

Then another skier shot forward on the Camel. But he did not land so successfully and the tips broke off his skis. Nevertheless his tension was so great that, without realising it, he jumped up and bent over again, standing rigidly with his sticks under his arms. And so he posed, as if hypnotised, on his mutilated skis with the tips stuck in the snow, until they reached him and shook him out of his trance.

"What's the matter? Why do they all fall there?" asked

Vadim Sergeyevich, looking round. Sergei was standing nearby.

"It's the rise." Sergei looked up at the sun through his goggles. "It's baking hot now, that explains why..." He used his hand to show how a skier was thrown on the melting surface at full speed.

Marina was squatting next to Sergei. She had taken off her mittens and was massaging his knees firmly.

"Do the ankle-bones hurt?" she asked, without raising her head.

"Not much," Sergei replied briefly, concentrating on the sensations in his tightly-clad legs.

The journalist who was eagerly absorbing everything around him, took a good look at the ascetic figure of the no longer young skier in a suit that fitted him like a glove. He was impressed by the face with its splendid chiselling that comes from a strict routine and a single obsession. He wanted to discuss his impressions, but Vadim Sergeyevich pointed to the start.

"Look. This should be interesting."

At the edge of the run, behind the starter's flag, stood the lad in the black ski suit with bright orange stripes waiting alertly for the signal. The few silent moments of waiting before the start, when a sportsman hears the beating of his own heart, oppressed him. He kept bending down and straightening up, glancing impatiently at the imperturbable man in felt boots. He noticed nothing around him. In spirit he was out there, on the mountain side, amid the nasty surprises of the treacherous course that was already beginning to melt.

As soon as the flag dropped he propelled himself forward with a strong urgent thrust of his sticks in the snow. From the start they could see him make straight for the bumps without trying to avoid them. "He's in too much of a hurry!" Vadim Sergeyevich noted the young skier's excessively forward stance, which makes your ski tips dig into the snow and slows down your speed. On the bumps the boy's legs had a hard job cushioning the blows and jolts. But somewhere he miscalculated and overestimated. Just before the Camel he catapulted forward and was carried onto the rocky scree. For a few moments he hung in the air out of control. At the last moment he managed to reach the ground. He touched the slope with

the sharp metal edge of his ski, but then shot forward again, on the very ridge, with a deep, involuntary cry of "Oops".

"He was lucky!" said Vadim Sergeyevich with obvious relief. "He didn't negotiate the bump properly."

The journalist moved up to him with his notebook ready.

"What was that you said?"

"The bump. Bend your knees for a bump, straighten them for a gully..."

At the bend just before the Funnel the lad suddenly went into a skid along the melting ice; a cloud of snow rose up; but he turned his skis onto the metal edge, and quickly stopped the skid, although the experienced Vadim Sergeyevich made a mental note that this had reduced his speed and cost him a few seconds. Naturally Sergei and the others whose turn was still to come would take this into their calculations.

Annoyed that a whole year of hard training could be wasted by some unforeseen hitch, the lad sped into the Funnel so furiously that everyone who was watching felt afraid. Vadim Sergeyevich even stood on tiptoe, as if hoping to see what was happening in that breakneck funnel before the final straight stretch.

In the few seconds when the skier could not be seen from any point and continued his frantic race in total isolation amid the steep, narrow cliffs, the whole gorge from the pass to the serene houses down below waited anxiously. But then he reappeared far away, on the final stretch, racing like the wind, bent low on his skis with his sticks tucked under his arms. The sun picked out his orange stripe for the last time.

Skiing past the roaring crowd at the finish, he straightened himself up slowly, taking deep gulps of air, and let himself slide along smoothly and effortlessly. He skied a long way from the spectators, then stopped and pulled the goggles off his face tiredly.

"How about that?" Vadim Sergeyevich's eyes were shining with excitement. "How about that for background material? Write about sportsmen like that. Other people should know all about them. They don't think just of themselves when they ski."

"Well, I'll be damned!" the journalist muttered, writ-

ing so feverishly he almost broke his pencil. "Listen, I think I'm beginning to understand. So those are the boyos, eh? Real dare-devils!"

He was very excited and wanted to talk about everything—to criticise some competitors, praise others, and make predictions, for nowhere more than in sport does the dabbler feel so sure of himself. Now he could not think why he hadn't noticed at once what a fake the Dealer was, who looked so splendid compared to the others. But the competition was not over yet, and looking where Vadim Sergeyevich was now staring so excitedly, the journalist stopped and fell silent. Sergei was standing at the start.

At that moment the loudspeaker blared out below, and a voice from the finish echoed along the slope, announcing the boy's result. Sergei could not believe his ears. He waited, but no correction followed. Then he said something to the sedate man in the felt boots and cap, who agreed and removed the flag. Sergei began feverishly tearing the rings off his sticks.

"He's mad," muttered Vadim Sergeyevich, involuntarily moving nearer. He was afraid for Sergei: if he was already tearing his rings off to reduce wind resistance to a minimum, that meant he would risk anything.

The delay was over. The rings lay in the snow. The starter raised his flag again.

Sergei moved forward and placed his skis over the steep drop. He seemed calm and unruffled, and gazed only ahead and down. The one thing he could not control was his involuntary clutching at the sticks, as if he were trying to grasp them more firmly and securely.

In the tense silence that followed the snow crunched under Sergei's skis, and at that moment the signal rang out, the flag moved, and the skier who had been standing so unconcernedly, sped down the slope as if on skates, with long, sweeping strides. The confident swish of his skis on the hard snow carved out an elegant herringbone pattern like the blades of racing skates. Having gained momentum, Sergei put his skis together, tucked his sticks under his arms, and crouched low.

He felt the familiar resistance of the elastic mass of air which had suddenly become almost tangible, felt the soft wave of the current strike his cheeks, chest and knees, and realised that he was travelling at top speed, the ide-

al speed at which your firmly bound skis quiver and vibrate, the tips shudder, but do not go out of control and react instantly to the impulses of the commands generated with a kind of electronic accuracy in the feverish brain.

Right from the start it was obvious how smoothly, and gently he negotiated the first obstacles. His experienced legs responded instantly and accurately to the slightest unevenness on the slope. In spots where the foolhardy and inexperienced were tossed into the air and then lost precious seconds trying to recover their balance and not to fall, Sergei flew along without jolts or bumps, as if the surface had been specially oiled for him, "licking" round the rolls, gullies and bumps with sinuous movements incomprehensible to the eye of the beholder.

"He's like a panther, isn't he?" the journalist enthused affectionately.

The bumps just before the Camel were a hard test for Sergei too. Vadim Sergeyevich, who was so anxious for him to win, expected him to reduce speed and not take risks. Particularly as he had a little time in hand, the few seconds that the young skier had dropped when he lost his balance just before the Funnel. Sergei himself thought differently, however. He had taken those seconds into account, of course, but only theoretically. He would save them in case he covered the whole course perfectly. But the slope was already churned up and getting softer all the time. It was quite possible that at some point he would lose control and go into a skid like the boy before him. Moreover he had not forgotten that the moment was approaching when he would feel the familiar weight on his shoulders and carry it with him all the way right up to the finish. The descent took about two minutes in all, a short space of time, but however fast he went, however much he trained, he could not avoid that weight. It would be there today as well, although he had trained long and hard, kept a strict routine, slept fairly well, waxed his skis expertly, and even pulled the rings off his sticks! If only he could cover half the course before it came.

Sergei all but flew over the bumps before the Camel, so treacherous and dangerous for beginners. Quivering and hissing through the air his skis touched the snow for an instant only, but this was enough for him to remain com-

pletely in control of his actions, while retaining the speed of a hurricane. A rough, hard wind blew in his face, burning his cheeks, but with his eyes securely protected by goggles he could probe the frozen slope rushing towards him with the accuracy of a laser and keep watch on the hill, the most treacherous one, with the melting rise. No sooner had he thought of it, than there was a blast of cold on the side of his face. That was the stone scree, and there it was—melting and slippery as soap. Sergei managed to thrust his body forward in good time, but immediately his skis shot forward too and he flew up, uttering the same animal cry as the others: "Oops!"

Now that he was skiing along a parabola, Sergei bent his knees to his chest to give his scarred and not so young legs a rest. If only he could take one good, deep breath! Then he could keep going for the Funnel. Damn the Funnel! He knew that the sun there would not touch the snow, so it was like skiing on ice. You must prepare in advance so that you had enough strength for the two difficult, treacherous bends. The first, as he now realised, was an excessively hard one, a long right turn with a reverse bend (His poor legs!). The other was easier. Or was it? If it had been at the beginning of the course, but it wasn't. How badly he wanted to stretch out, to straighten his numb shoulders and take a deep breath! Just one deep breath, to drink in the air and throw out his chest. He needed so little now. It was the young lads with their reserves of strength and youth who naively supposed that the path to victory was unpredictable, and waited for a lucky moment, a piece of good fortune. But he, with his age and failures, had long since discovered the truth. He knew the true path to success, and it was by this path that he hoped to reach the finish today. But, unfortunately, he also knew how hard and exhausting it was, and like a miser collecting crumbs, he economised in lots of little ways. For years he had waited for the time when the sweet moment of victory would come to him too, he had striven hard for it, never retreating, acquiring with injury and grey hair the necessary bitter experience. Yesterday he had carefully primed his trusty skis and this morning rubbed them lovingly, like a sick child. He had polished the slides with special care, so as not to slacken speed on the numerous bends. He had lovingly filed the

metal edges, softened the flanges by the tips, and sandpapered the long grooves that help on straight stretches of the course. (He had decided to take the straight stretches at top speed.) Nevertheless there was something he had omitted, some trifling detail, because as he was getting ready to negotiate the Funnel more economically and already planning to lift his inside ski slightly so as not to overturn and fall, his skis suddenly took the curve before the mound more slowly than he had expected and he was thrust forward. He had to land on one ski. He automatically regained balance and straightened his knees, allowing the skis to settle under the weight of his frantically straining body.

"What acrobatics! Perhaps I should reduce speed a little? I've got something in hand," the cautious thought popped up. But he immediately cursed himself for his faint-heartedness and cowardice, and bellowed back loudly and sternly at the other person who kept advising caution. He seemed to have succeeded in shutting him up.

But was it for long?

He knew that fear on a downhill run was the constant companion of all skiers, both experienced and inexperienced, and that none of them regarded this as at all shameful, because otherwise anyone who felt like it would try downhill racing. Moreover, fear was one of the attractions. It made a person feel that he was living to the limit of his strength. The art of the downhill skier was to bury his fear as deeply as possible and at the same time to remain in control, not to overstep this final, fatal limit of his ability and strength.

On the Stratofana he had been full of strength and had wanted to master it by youth alone. What childishness! As the Austrian had rightly said, it was not only his skis that had been his downfall there. Yes, it was true, he had slowed down and not taken the bend in time, but he had lost speed because his legs were too tense to feel the unevenness of the bumpy terrain. Now, after all his injuries, after the treatment and the many other failures, he was like a wise and experienced beast on the hunt. Barely thinking about the Funnel, he began to distribute his weight evenly on both feet, as if on springs. He withdrew into himself and held his breath. Now would come the fear, the most responsible and difficult moment...

Without slowing down, he sped towards the bend and began to cut the corner boldly, pleased to feel that the skier before him had swept away all the treacherous, melted snow leaving him the hard surface into which his well-sharpened skis cut with ease.

To the delight of the spectators he inscribed a perfect turn as if it had been drawn with a ruler.

"The old boy's not past it yet!" Vadim Sergeyevich heard behind him. "He's going like a bomb."

The enormous weight of the overloads at the bend bore down on the skier, pressing him still harder to his skis. He choked as if he were being suffocated and gritted his teeth, but kept control and finished the bend. Then suddenly, as he sped towards the Funnel, he realised that he could not see anything. Everything had gone dark, he had lost his sight. "Told you so!" come the satisfied cry from the little person inside him who had been maintaining an offended silence.

Before, at previous competitions, Sergei had given way to him and sideslipped to slacken speed. Now the rage welled up in him and he felt furious, as if he had just glimpsed the mocking smirk of his adviser for the first time. Over the years he had grown sick and tired of him, his persistent presence, his constant caution, his cowardly power over him. He was fed up with him. "Damn you!" Sergei cursed, shaking all over from the crazy, wild vibration on the steep, icy slope. Plunging headlong into the howling wind, he hunched up even more and, in defiance of his adviser, crouched low on his skis. His face with its bared teeth was frightening.

The loss of sight, which had allowed fear to enter his heart, was momentary, caused by excessive strain. He soon felt the strange veil lift from his eyes, and with it the person inside him also fell silent. Perhaps fear had quietened him, fear of the ever-growing, uncontrollable speed? Whatever the reason, he stopped nagging, moaning and advising. Sergei thought he had left him somewhere in that terrible, breakneck Funnel at the most frightening and tense moment. Now he was free again, alone again, master of the course as never before in all his best years.

Ahead lay a bend, then another slightly easier one, and after that the straight stretch up to the finish. "That's it!" he exulted, unbending slightly and preparing for the

rapid and well-learnt body manoeuvres to master the last few obstacles.

At the bend he was dragged onto a ridge of loose snow and shaken by the sudden braking. This was easy enough to cope with, but at that moment one of his skis hit a bump invisible under the snow. Unprepared, his legs unrelaxed, he received what was like a blow to his ski and began to keel over slowly to one side. "Steady on!" he commanded, doing his utmost to keep his balance. But he no longer had the strength to level out the fall—it had all been used up on the slope, particularly in the Funnel, where he had got rid of his insistent adviser.

The last thing the falling skier saw and remembered was the red calico of the finish, only a short way off.

Vadim Sergeyevich could not recall what had triggered his presentiment of disaster. There was a pause when the sportsman disappeared into the Funnel for a few seconds and everyone seemed to hear the short thunderous roar of his skis on the ice, the peaceful slope was still basking in the warm midday sun, and no one had yet uttered a sombre, funereal "Amen". But Vadim Sergeyevich was already running over the deep snow to the chair lift, raising his feet high and waving his arms.

Sergei was carried to the base on a long sledge. The slope had shredded Sergei, like a grater. His attractive tight fitting ski suit was ripped to pieces. Vadim Sergeyevich hurried after the sledge, wading through the snow, trying to inspect the places where the friction against the ice had melted the elastic. The skin there was dark with burns. Sergei was mumbling something incoherently and making attempts to get up.

Holding the sledge so that it did not slide down, the rescue team was trying to ward off spectators who were running up. Skiers came down the slope, joined the group, and skied silently along with it. Two lads were carrying Sergei's skis and sticks, and a third had found his goggles somewhere in the snow. The fall, as Vadim Sergeyevich had ascertained, was a bad one, but he was hoping that the automatic safety bindings had worked in time. A hard side blow should have made them release the sportsman from his heavy and dangerous skis.

In order to reach the huts at the base the rescue team first had to cross the competition course. The whole

group with the sledge stopped by the broad, flattened strip. Up above the small figure of a crouching skier was speeding towards the Funnel.

Sergei took advantage of the halt to prop himself up awkwardly on the sledge. His face was contracted with pain and he was shaking his dishevelled head like a drunk. Vadim Sergeyevich sat down next to him and tried to examine his legs. Sergei winced and groaned—the slightest touch was unbearably painful.

At this moment the skier who had come out of the Funnel whizzed past. Bent low with his sticks under his arms, he was staring tensely ahead, his eyes fixed on the gay red calico of the finish.

Sergei turned his head and watched slowly as the skier whistled past. The joyful shouts of the spectators were soon heard from the finish.

"Pity," Sergei muttered, avoiding the eyes of those who were watching him. "It was so close."

He looked at a scrap of cloth hanging from his elbow, tore it off angrily and threw it away. Through the rent on his knee he caught sight of his torn body, fingered it cautiously, and shook his head dejectedly.

It was like this, sitting in the sledge and lacerated beyond recognition, that Marina found him when she hurried up.

"Now then, steady on," Sergei hastened to reassure her.

She rushed up to him, knelt down and ran her strong, trained doctor's fingers firmly and professionally over his injured legs.

"What about here? Does it hurt? And here?"

Yelping and writhing with pain, Sergei threw back his ashen face. He would have fallen on his back if it had not been for Marina. Putting her arms round his shoulders, she carefully laid him down again in the sledge and signalled impatiently that they should set off.

Vadim Sergeyevich picked up the broken skis and sticks collected by the boys. The young lad in the black ski suit with orange flashes walked up to Sergei and placed on his chest the lost goggles, huge, strangely bent, with their thick rubber rims, an object of universal interest and envy. A change came over the injured skier's face: taking the goggles, Sergei gazed at them pensively for a long time, turning them this way and that, then he hooked a

finger round the rubber strap, swung them carelessly once or twice, then suddenly whirled them round and let go so that the young skier with the orange flashes, who was standing nearby, caught them.

"Keep them!" he said, then lay down and closed his eyes, without even looking at the radiantly happy boy.

A loud, magnified voice over the loudspeaker from the finish asked the group with the sledge to get off the course. The competition continued.

## Valery Murzakov

# WE CAN WALK NOW, MUM

### 1

Lorry driver Sergei Loktiev left for the first run of the winter season with his ZIL only half loaded. He had messed about in the dispatch office getting his papers and was the last in line for loading. There was quite a long wait outside the depot, because of the queue. Loktiev rested his elbows on the driving wheel, smoking or dozing. Everything was just as usual. He could never have guessed they would do the dirty on him and send him off without a full load.

The lorries driving out of the depot were low on their springs, although their load only reached the top of the sides. That meant pipes, or drilling equipment. Loktiev always tried not to get "hay", meaning extra-large loads, for long-distance runs. He particularly disliked crates of tinned food. He'd not heard of any cases of pilfering, but you had to keep an eye on the crates when you spent the night in a village. A load of iron was a different matter. You could park the lorry on the road and sleep soundly.

These thoughts passed through Loktiev's mind in the loading queue, in the intervals between dozing, when almost mechanically he moved the lorry a few yards forward, nearer to the gates. Eventually it was his turn. Loktiev drove to the platform as directed by a young fellow in white, almost new tarpaulins.

When he climbed out of the cabin three loaders, all strangers to him, were already busy in the back. Loktiev took his time, stretching and watching the loaders pull off the tarpaulin and fold it neatly back over the cabin. He decided they knew what they were doing, but neverthe-

less asked where the overseer was. He was shown a tall fellow in a green, padded army jacket, whom he had also never seen before.

"Have I got time for a bite in the canteen, lads?" he asked.

"Sure, if there's not a queue."

As he had expected, the canteen was empty. Loktiev not only had a good meal, but a smoke in the corridor. The canteen girl pretended not to notice. He bought a block of Inter cigarettes from her which he didn't actually need. Loktiev smoked Belomor with the cardboard mouthpiece and he had a whole bag of them in his cabin. The canteen girl was very young and attractive, with darting eyes—the sort of girl that eagerly puts up her hand at school and gives the wrong answer.

Loktiev smoked, glancing through the half-open door at the canteen girl. She was very quick at her job. She clattered the cups and saucers in the corner that served as a place for storing and washing up. He could see her slender, round hands moving the piles of plates. Next she went over to the counter, put some cutlets and a jar of sour cream into the refrigerator, wiped the counter nice and clean and only then perched on her stool and began to stare at the ceiling, although she realised (Loktiev was sure of this) that he was watching her.

"She's a smart lass," he thought. "She won't stay single for long."

Loktiev thought that if he had to get married, he would choose someone like her. And that moment he made up his mind to stop seeing Larissa, the librarian at the settlement of Perevalny. They had been going together for three years now, although very much on a seasonal basis, as Larissa had put it. It began with the first run of the winter season and ended with the last. Or rather, there was a break in the summer. Larissa sometimes wrote to him at the hostel, but he never replied.

"You could drop me a line. Just to say you're alright. Or send a telegram," Larissa would say when they met.

"What's the point, Lari," he replied. "I'll never make a writer. Me and my brother used to tear up our grammar books to roll our own fags. That's all I ever learnt at school." Saying that made him feel a bit embarrassed. In fact he'd never had a brother, and he had learnt more than

that at school. If he hadn't been so stupid when his father died, he would have a school-leaving certificate now. But he had chucked in school with a year still to go after a load of bad marks in the first term. His mother couldn't do anything about it then. She had taken the stick to him once or twice, but he had only laughed at her.

"It's too late now, Mum. You should have thrashed me earlier."

Loktiev did not tell Larissa anything about his background, in case she started getting ideas. He just talked about the grammar book that he and his "brother" had smoked.

Larissa understood what it meant, of course. "Why do you keep going on about your grammar book? I'm not trying to make you marry me. I just love you, that's all." She was clever, and Loktiev liked that, although for some reason it always scared him.

This summer Larissa had spent her holiday with her family, somewhere in the Ukraine. She had come back about a month ago and sent him a telegram. He felt like charging off to see her straightaway through fire and water. "No, Larissa, love," he thought. "That won't do. I'll come for the last time and we'll call it a day. Otherwise you'll get under my skin. Habit's a real devil."

Loktiev's interest in the canteen girl was purely abstract. For him she was simply the exact opposite of Larissa, nothing more. He had quite enough on his plate as it was. That summer his mother had started writing him masses of letters. Before, they had written to each other once every six months, and that was quite enough. She knew that he was hale and hearty from the money orders. Sometimes he wrote a line on the money transfer asking how she was and telling her to take care, but sometimes he wrote nothing. His mother had stopped work many years ago, but she still had a few animals and kept up the vegetable garden. She enjoyed good health on the whole. The weather sometimes made her hands ache, but it always had for as long as he could remember. Then suddenly there was this panic-stricken letter saying she hadn't got much longer to live, and if she still had a son would he come and see her. And all the rest about only being able to plant half the vegetable garden, only two buckets of potatoes, and not having the strength to look af-

ter the cow anymore (there hadn't been enough hay for the winter and she'd had to ask her neighbour for some), and the goose had let her eggs get cold and none of them had hatched out, twelve goslings lost, and so on and so forth in the same vein.

Loktiev thought it over and decided his mother was just upset and there was no point in doing anything hasty. He wrote telling her to take things easier, sell the livestock and give up the vegetable garden. He earned enough to keep his mother, thank goodness. And if she needed a rest cure, she should take some money out of the savings bank and go to a holiday resort or a rest home. He knew her habit of putting every kopeck into the savings bank. But she'd have to break it for once. He didn't send the money for her to hoard it up. Let her enjoy herself in her old age. And stop working herself to death.

Loktiev re-read the letter and was pleased with it. Yet there was something about the tone that made him feel slightly uncomfortable. Not even the tone, but the fact that he had begun calling her "Mother", instead of "Mum" as before, not "dear Mum", but just "Mother".

Loktiev stuffed the letter into his pocket and carried it around for a couple of days. In the end he bought an envelope and sent it off just as it was. The reply came quicker than he could have expected. "She'll tear me off a strip, I bet," he grinned to himself, as he opened the letter. But his mother did not reproach him at all, and the further he read, the more sad and thoughtful he became. She wrote that she was ready to sell up everything, even the house, and come to live with him, if he could not return to the village. That was how she had understood his letter. And if he, as a bachelor, didn't have a flat, he must ask his superiors for a room. She was sure they wouldn't refuse if it was for his old mother. She wasn't afraid of the cold. She felt better in winter. As long as she didn't have to look after the livestock, she didn't care if it was winter all the year round. She would have her son and the stove to keep her warm.

It was mid-summer and the temperature was in the eighties. Loktiev was taking water-melons from the landing stage to the base, and the heat in the cabin was stifling. He was amused by his mother's remarks about the cold.

"What funny ideas people have about the Far North,"

he thought. "They know about the cold, but none of them realises you could die of the heat here in summer. Mother's just the same..." But then he remembered describing the horrors of the Yakutian winter to her when he was on leave. "It's so freezing, Mum, that when you blow hard it makes a cracking sound. That's the little bits of ice in the air that begin to snap." Yet his mother was not deterred by these horrors. For him she was ready to give up everything she had grown used to in her long life. Loktiev felt a lump of tenderness and pity for his mother swell up in his throat. There weren't any more like her these days...

The next day he hurried round to the trade union office. "They're bound to give me a room," he assured himself. "Not a flat, there's no chance of that. But they should give me a room for mother." For his dear old mother. They couldn't refuse him that.

The chairman of the trade union committee, Ivan Semyonovich Korepov, was a good bloke, who had been a lorry driver himself until his fingers got frost-bitten on a run five years ago. All the doctors had left him was his palms. "So I can still clap hands," he used to say. As soon as they discharged him from hospital, Korepov, still bandaged up, left with his boys and wife for the mainland. He was away for two years. There were rumours that he had bought a house in Moldavia and had learned to drink vodka holding the glass in both hands, or what was left of them. Two years later he returned unexpectedly, and not on his own, to spy out the land, but as he had left, with his whole ménage. His flat had been taken, of course, so he rented half a house from an old woman in the settlement and came to see the head of the Automobile Transport Department.

"Take me back. Even if it's just as a watchman."

They took him and shortly afterwards elected him chairman of the trade union committee. This was his third year in the job. He dictated funny reports for trade union meetings, signed documents with a huge souvenir pen which he held in his two stumps as firmly as the vodka glass in Moldavia, and was an ardent teetotaller. In spite of this the drivers liked him and said it was the first time they had elected a trade union committee chairman who was worthy of the office. There had been all sorts: some not too bad, others not too good. They were alright until

they got elected, but put them behind a desk and butter wouldn't melt in their mouth. You couldn't tell in advance what a person's really like, could you?

But they hadn't made a mistake with Korepov. You could hardly say the drivers now had more trade union perks than they knew what to do with, everything was about the same as before in that respect, but whatever he did was so fair that no one ever complained even when requests were refused. Korepov hardly ever sat at his desk. He would stick his hands under his armpits and pace round his office. When he had to sign anything he took the big pen out of the holder, scribbled a flourish standing up and went on pacing round in circles again. The expression on his face seemed to beg forgiveness: I shouldn't be here in the warm, while you're out there driving in the cold...

Perhaps not everybody thought so, but this was the impression Loktiev had of Korepov, although he had only been to his office twice. Once in connection with a standard pay increase, when something funny started going on in the accounts department, and another time when Korepov summoned him there. Loktiev had just got back from a run and taken the usual number of days off, but then had to take another half-day without permission to recover. He arrived at the trade union office not in the best of shape, but still in fairly high spirits, so to say. He sat down without being invited:

"Want to see me, Ivan Semyonovich?"

Korepov did not reply. He continued to walk round in circles with a guilty expression on his face, as if he was about to get a ticking off from Loktiev, and not the other way round, as if Loktiev, light-headed after his drinking spree and grinning somewhat inanely, should have given him reprimand. How long did the pacing go on? Probably only a minute or two, but long enough for Loktiev to forget all the excuses he had wanted to make jokingly to Korepov and to get angry. "Who does he think he is? A written-off lorry driver."

Actually, this was the first time Loktiev had used Korepov's patronymic, and he did so not so much out of respect, but more as a bit of a joke. Couldn't he understand? What was all the fuss about? So he'd been on a drinking spree. Well, let them put up a notice with an official re-

buke. They'd take it down before the New Year and stick up a letter of thanks instead. Why was he sitting here? He wasn't a schoolboy you could put in the corner.

Loktiev waited for Korepov to get tired of keeping quiet and let him have it. But Korepov went on pacing the room, making the floorboards creak, and sticking his deformed hands deeper and deeper under his armpits.

If he had started shouting about a sense of responsibility Loktiev would have shouted back. He was quite capable of doing that and even slamming the door as he went out. But Korepov kept quiet, and Loktiev's anger gradually subsided. He still did not feel particularly guilty, but his face began to turn red... Just as it had in childhood when he ran in from the street and sometimes felt ... uncomfortable, was it, when his father unexpectedly grabbed him by the arm. He could never remember what he had been up to that day—pulling off young cucumbers, leaving a dead cat on the neighbours' porch, or some other bit of mischief. Sergei would feverishly try to remember what terrible thing he must have done to make his father grab hold of his sleeve. Usually he could not recall what it was, but for some reason this made him feel even more ashamed.

He had a similar feeling sitting in front of Korepov. Eventually he could stand it no longer.

"Well, what about it, Ivan Semyonovich?"

Korepov stopped for a moment and looked at him in surprise.

"Well, that's that," Korepov hunched his shoulders as if expecting a blow from behind. "Off to work with you."

Loktiev got up and for the first time since he had been sitting there, their eyes met. Korepov's glance was so full of anguish, that Loktiev wanted to beg his forgiveness, as he had begged his father as a child. What for? He did not know, not exactly, but this only made him feel guiltier. He almost ran to the door and closed it carefully after him. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and his shirt was sticking to his back.

"You're a right one, Ivan Semyonovich," he repeated to himself, striding across the yard to the depot. The drivers asked him no questions and busied themselves with their engines. Only Gena, his drinking companion who had somehow managed to report for duty on time, showed any sympathy. Or was he taking the mickey?

"Congratulations on taking your medicine," he said, wincing and coughing.

"Yeah", Loktiev replied absently.

"I told you to get up, but you wouldn't budge. Had a good sleep, did you? It's always like that with Korepov." Gena rolled his eyes dreamily, as if being told off by Ivan Semyonovich was a real bonus.

It was funny, but Sergei also had the feeling that he had just been somewhere else, not in the office of the trade union committee chairman, but in a kind of confessional, and had been cleansed of many sins which had been burdening him. Later he often remembered this enforced encounter with Korepov and tried to figure out how Korepov had affected him like that. "He's so honest it's frightening," was the only explanation he could find. If Loktiev had been asked about Korepov's fearful honesty, he could have recalled one occasion only, when a trade union general meeting had resolved to allocate Ivan Semyonovich a flat out of turn, and he had refused. "I'll wait my turn in the queue like everyone else." That was all the evidence Loktiev had of Korepov's honesty, but he would have laid into anyone who doubted it for an instant.

So it was to the self-same Korepov that Loktiev turned on this occasion, sure that he would help, although actually Sergei had no right to a room. All he needed to say were the two magic words "room" and "mother" and all would be well.

Korepov was sitting on the bench outside his office, on the side without windows facing the depot yard. The sun was shining straight into his face. He was smoking with eyes half-closed, the cigarette moist and dark between his lips. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his linen jacket and the cigarette ash fell unimpeded onto his trousers. Loktiev went up and sat next to him. Korepov half-opened his eyes.

"I drag myself out here every day after dinner. At least you get a smell of petrol here..."

They were silent. Korepov spat out his fag end, and Sergei lit up.

After a few long drags, he began to explain why he was there, but it did not come out as briefly and clearly as he intended. What he said was lengthy, confused and some-

how ingratiating. He used the word "mother" so often that in the end he began to avoid it, referring to his mother simply as "she".

Korepov looked at Sergei with a suffering expression as if he understood everything and sympathised, but in spite of this it was humiliating to have to explain his request. The sun was so blinding that Loktiev's eyes began to water, but he went on looking at Ivan Semyonovich, without brushing the tears or blinking. "Let's hope he doesn't think I'm turning on the waterworks." The tears dried on the edges of his eyelids, then welled up again, but Loktiev still couldn't get to the end of his long rigmarole, which could have been summed up in two words: "mother" and "room".

When he finally stopped and lit his second cigarette, there was a flash of envy in Korepov's eyes, his shoulders shook and he turned away. Loktiev interpreted this gesture in his own way. He took a deep drag on his cigarette, coughed and then exhaled, no longer afraid of brushing away the tears.

"We only have one mother, don't we, Ivan Semyonovich?"

This was the final debasement, and Loktiev resolved not to say another word.

Korepov gave another envious squint at the cigarette. "Your mother's ill, you say," he said flatly.

"That's what her letter says..."

"Then what are you dragging her out here for?"

Loktiev said nothing.

"Come on, answer me. Say we give you a room. Manage to find you one. You go off for a fortnight on a run and what about your mother? There's bread and milk to be got. And the heating and water..."

"I'll find an old woman."

"An old woman to look after another old woman?" Korepov looked at him and shook his head.

"That's no good, lad. Now if you were to get married and your wife looked after her, that would be a different matter. But the rest is rubbish."

"So you don't advise it, Ivan?"

"That's not the point," Korepov said, ignoring the fact that Loktiev had used his first name only. "There aren't any rooms. So I can't help you. Put me in front of the firing squad, I still can't."

"What should I do then?"

"We only have one mother, as you said." Korepov gave him a long look full of suffering. "Give us the rest of your fag, lad." He licked his dry lips.

Loktiev tore off the end of the cardboard holder, thrust the cigarette into Korepov's mouth and went off without saying goodbye. "He only cares about society," he thought angrily about the chairman. "Don't give a damn for Loktiev." Deep down he knew Korepov was right, but the thought was not a pleasing one.

Loktiev weighed everything up and decided he would have to go home. There was nothing else for it, like it or not. But he would stay here for the winter. Then he'd get his fare paid home and a long leave so he could look around for work and not jump at the first offer. He wrote one more letter to his mother explaining the situation and asking her to wait until the spring. Summer had passed and it was now mid-autumn, but still his mother did not write. At first he worried, then he decided that she was satisfied with his letter, and stopped worrying.

There was one very difficult thing that he still had to do here, in the Far North—to explain the situation to Larissa, and the sooner the better. He didn't want to just disappear without a word. After all she had been more to him than a casual woman you spend the night with after a long, tiring run, then forget the next morning forever or until the next meeting if it ever takes place. He used to miss Larissa and even carried a photo of her in his wallet. The Larissa on the photograph was quite different from the one in real life—a glamorous blonde with a cold, almost frigid expression.

"The photographer forgot to tell you to watch the birdie before he took this one," he said to her, taking the photo out of the album. Larissa laughed losing all resemblance to the person on the photograph. Everything was different, the nose, the lips, and especially the eyes, alive, sparkling, and a little puzzled.

"This is a smasher! Stick it on your passport and they'll arrest you as an imposter," Loktiev teased her, holding out the photo and comparing it with her.

"Give it back. I don't photograph well." Larissa wanted to take it away from him, but he put it in his pocket and had carried it around ever since.

Loktiev was not a sentimental person. He had taken Larissa's photo because that was what village lads did. Most of them had a handkerchief embroidered by their girl friend, and all of them had a photo. He put the photo on the windscreen and liked looking at it to relieve the tension of a long run, winking at the icy eyes and imagining the real Larissa.

A wave of tenderness came over him as he thought of her. Not only for Larissa, but for all the women he had known and for those who probably awaited him in the future. Loktiev was one of those men in whom the very idea of marriage—which he associated strictly with marital fidelity—aroused instant irritation and protest. He knew it was time he got married, but something made him look for reasons to put it off. Working in the Far North he had seen many people make repeated efforts to set up a family and eventually give up. He had also seen men crying over their glass of vodka for the children they had left thousands of miles away, and he never felt sympathy for them. Sometimes he had told them what he thought.

"Nobody forced you to go to the registry office, did they? So stop moaning."

Loktiev had resolved firmly not to be tempted by marital bliss, not to get married until he had sown his wild oats, if there was the slightest doubt in his mind.

He did not believe in love. "Love! That's alright for teenagers, but once you get a bit of experience... It's a stupid word!" Everything that bound him to Larissa he explained partly as habit and partly as her lack of selfishness. He had doubts about the latter, however. If a woman was not "experienced" and didn't want anything, it must mean she's trying to trap you. The fact that Larissa had been trying to "trap" him for three years did not seem inconsistent with this. "They've each got their own method." He did not feel guilty towards Larissa, for he had never made her any promises and never demanded any from her. If she found someone, let her marry him. He wouldn't try to stop her. He'd even send his congratulations. And have a drink with the lucky fellow, if he didn't object, of course. He not only thought this but sometimes began to explain it to Larissa, as he lay next to her, blowing smoke rings up to the ceiling, and feeling that the almost sleepless night had not affected him in the slight-

est, and that he would soon get dressed, have a good meal and be able to sit at the wheel for another eighteen hours. Nothing angered her as much as these philosophical ramblings. They even brought tears to her eyes.

"You're better than that," she would say, choking. "I know you are."

"Look at her. Stubborn as a mule. All right then, have it your own way."

Loktiev was flattered that Larissa got angry. He accepted the idea that a woman could love a man...

Today, standing in the corridor and glancing at the canteen girl, although he had finished his cigarette, Loktiev thought he was wrong to accept this idea. If he believed that she, Larissa, could love him, how could he give her the push? How would he begin? Well, he could tell her this and that, about his mother and the rest of it. He could talk himself blue in the face, but he'd still have to look at her, look into her eyes. She'd start crying. Then he'd have to back out and make himself scarce. No trying to calm her down. How could he anyway? Or she'd grab hold of him and say, "I love you, don't leave me." What could he answer? "But I don't love you"? "Then why did you keep coming here?" she might ask. As if she didn't know why...

The less time there was before his talk with Larissa—he had decided to tell her on his first winter run—the worse he felt. He could put it off until the spring, of course, until his departure, but that would be mean. He must make a clean break.

Loktiev looked at his watch. It was time to go. They'd probably finished loading his lorry by now.

"I'm off. Be good, kiddo!" he said perkily to the canteen girl.

She raised her eyes to him and made a face as if she was really sorry he was going.

"Safe journey."

Loktiev picked up the block of cigarettes and left.

"If I took a bit of trouble with her, she might be alright," he thought. She hadn't got Larissa's hands, of course, but you could get used to rough skin.

The platform was empty, the doors of the depot closed, and the back of his ZIL had been covered with tarpaulin and tied across with rope.

"Why the blazes have they turned the old girl into a one-humped camel," muttered Loktiev, immediately realising that the lorry was not full. Grabbing hold of the side, he climbed onto the wheelbase and looked into the back. Perhaps it had been loaded with bars or other metal. But the back was half empty and lightly powdered with snow.

"How about that," Loktiev jumped down and glanced up at the sky. It was clear. The tall feathery clouds did not cover its pale blue completely. But a few snowflakes were drifting down, glittering like sequins in the sun.

"Damn and blast!" Loktiev swore. He climbed up the platform and went into the storehouse. It was in semi-darkness. A single light bulb was shining brightly in the store-woman's window. The store-woman was sitting in her tiny wooden shed covered with thin sheets of metal for fire-prevention purposes. The shed door was open. In the shaft of bright light streaming from it the loaders were sitting on empty crates, drinking tea and blowing into their mugs. Occasionally one of them would get up, take the kettle from the stove and top up, without going into the shed. The tea was as black as pitch.

"So you've finished, lads, have you?" Loktiev asked the loaders politely.

"Aye, we're all having a rest," said the foreman. He settled down more comfortably and began to blow into his mug with great concentration, raising his fair eyebrows high.

Lena the store-woman, known as the Beautiful Helen, put her head round the door. As usual her hair had been backcombed into a beehive, making her head look unusually long like that of a horse.

"Hey, Loktiev. Where've you been, lad?" She disappeared for a moment into her hut, then looked out again and handed Loktiev the invoices. "Get a move on!"

"Are you crazy? With a half-empty lorry!"

"You're carrying instruments. We can't give you anything else, see? Or you'd break them. You can load up with cigarettes in Perevalny. They've asked us to take them."

"Maybe I should load it up with air?"

"You can do that on the way back. You're all travelling light this time."

Loktiev held the invoices in a quivering hand, but did not read them. He stared at the Beautiful Helen.

"What are you gawping at? Didn't you get it?"

Loktiev looked round. The loaders had stopped drinking tea and were staring at him curiously.

"So you're all in it too, eh?"

"Silly fool!" The store-woman closed the door of her office.

"I am a silly fool alright," Loktiev thought, driving out of the settlement onto the road, which had recently been cleared and was already flat and shining from the convoy of lorries. "Think what you'll lose now." All he had was some instruments and cigarettes. But never mind about money. He must get to Perevalny as quickly as possible and break it off with Larissa. He'd have time to earn money later. There were six months to go.

The even, powerful purr of the engine soothed him. Loktiev kept stepping on the gas and straining his eyes to catch sight of the lorries in the distance. Their leader was a strict bloke who did not like drivers lagging behind or getting too far ahead. He had to be strict. The winter road was no motorway. If your engine packed up you could say your prayers. Loktiev knew of several cases when the driver had used up all his reserves of oil or petrol and fallen asleep beside it forever, but still he often tried to pull ahead of the rest. This was connected with his visits to Larissa and his firm belief in himself and his lorry. Loktiev was sure he could make it alone on any of the winter runs. He was not afraid of the emptiness around him. If the leader began lecturing him, he would just give an impatient wave of his hand and say, "Give over..."

"Just look at Korepov. And he was lucky! But with your stubbornness you'll land up in a real mess one day, mate. Make no mistake about it."

"Quit moaning," Loktiev would say placatingly, thinking to himself: "What's he worried about? The only reason my ZIL doesn't fly is because it has no wings. You need to look after the engine, mate. Give me any old track and I'd get to the North Pole without the blessed convoy."

Yet he was angry with the drivers when he did not catch up the convoy at fifty kilometres, or even at one hundred. He wanted to unburden himself about that lousy lot at

the depot. According to the rules the convoy should have waited for him just outside the settlement, as they usually did. But some clever bastard must have started complaining: "Has he ever waited for us, eh? If they'd loaded him up first, he'd have been off like a shot to his bird. Like streaked lightning." They had probably groused like that, then decided to drive on until the night stop. Let him catch them up.

This was what Sergei decided (and what had in fact happened). He reduced speed to relax a bit, fished a packet of Belomor from the bag behind him without turning round and lit a cigarette. His thoughts began to drift slowly and lazily with the rumble of the ZIL travelling at around ninety. This always happened on a long run. He thought of his last visit home. It had been autumn, mid-September. Most people had already dug up their potatoes.

"Have you dug them up?" he asked his mother.

"I'm no worse than other folk, am I? I paid someone to do it. But I haven't put them down in the cellar yet. It should be cleaned first."

It the pantry Sergei found an old pair of tarpaulin boots turned over at the knee, wetted them in the bucket and put them on. They were just right, although he had worn them before he did national service. He took the best spade and went into the vegetable garden. The cellar was by the fence, near the cattle shed. It was overgrown with burdocks, and bright-feathered, raucous cockerels were strutting about in them.

"Shoo, shoo," said Sergei, clapping his hands like his mother did. The birds flew off hastily. Loktiev cut down the burdocks round the cellar door, lifted the latch and looked into the cellar, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. He climbed down and looked around. As he had expected, it was perfectly clean.

"Good old mum," Sergei shook his head and climbed out. The autumn sun was hot and the tiny cobwebs were flying. A pig was snuffling and grunting in the shed, and nearby some sheep were bleating.

"No flies on mother," he thought. "She keeps everything spick and span." He remembered how she used to nag his father all the time, finding him endless jobs to do, and laughed. "She'll soon start on me. I'd better go and put down the potatoes." He moved the sacks, stacked them,

and began to take them down one by one into the cellar. His mother came running up.

"Who asked you to do that? You should have spread them out under the awning first to dry."

"They're dry already, Mum."

"That's what you say, then they'll go rotten in the winter. You always take the easy way..."

Loktiev stood beside his mother. She barely came up to his shoulder and seemed very tiny compared with him. She was glad her son was so big and strong. In appearance and gait he resembled his father. So she grumbled at her son as she had grumbled at her husband, without malice, just out of habit.

Sergei understood this and smiled.

"I'll get them out again."

"Never mind, don't bother now. Come and have your dinner. I've got a cockerel in the pot."

"You'll feed me the whole farmyard."

"Who else am I keeping it for? Everything here is yours. I keep it up for you. My needs aren't great, are they?"

Now that Loktiev had definitely decided to stay until spring and then go home, he bore no grudge against the trade union committee chairman, and felt even more respect for him as a man who was not only honest, but firm and sensible.

A person should be level-headed, only a fool flew into a rage over nothing. You can forgive a child: if he wants a lolly, he'll scream his head off for it. But the sensible parent gives him a smack on the behind if he kicks out. But when a person's grown up he must decide whether to have his lolly today and regret it for the rest of his life, or whether to pull himself together and say: steady on, lad, what are you doing? Let's take a look at the long-term prospects first.

Loktiev was all in favour of long-term prospects, of planning your life. It was impossible to foresee everything, of course, and sometimes you had to make a few changes here and there, but that too must be done sensibly, not by being nice to people one day and sending them to blazes the next. You can live by using your head, and it's not a bad life either. You don't have to get yourself some little business. That sort of thing made Loktiev sick. Imagine him trading at the market with an apron on. You

can earn good money these days, if you're not afraid of work. An honest day's labour, as they say. But it's not a bad thing if your woman works in a shop or a canteen, so you must try and fix that up. Not because women like a bargain, but because you'll always get something that other people can't.

Is that so bad? No, it's very good. And it'll always be like that. Maybe there'll be plenty of meat and clothes around, but there'll always be some delicacy that's in short supply. That's why it's a delicacy.

Loktiev was pleased that he understood everything and could plan everything in advance.

Life should run as smoothly as his lorry. He couldn't remember anything important going wrong with it on a run. Lots of little things, of course, but nothing to really make you beg for a haul. But there were some smart alecs who couldn't be bothered to take a look at the engine at the depot, and then somewhere on route a thousand kilometres from the nearest house they started shouting for help.

Last year the anti-freeze started leaking from Petka Ponomarev's radiator, and Loktiev towed his lorry for twenty-four hours to the nearest filling station; then cursed him to blazes and left. There was no one who could mend the radiator there, of course. Never mind, let him hang around there for a bit. It would teach him a lesson. But then some soft-hearted idiot went and towed him all the way to a mining station. Now the two of them gave Loktiev nasty looks. Especially the soft-hearted one who did the towing. He thought he'd done someone a good turn. The accident could happen to anyone. But it only happens to lazy devils. If you don't know your engine, go and work on a sewage collection lorry. Big money attracts everyone, even idiots. One day Petka got drunk and said to him: "You'd have left me out there, if you hadn't been afraid of the other lads." The bastard! How many people Loktiev had helped out! Do someone a favour and that's what you get.

On the left by the edge of the road Sergei saw a black patch in the snow. "That's where they made tea in a bucket and had dinner," he decided, braking by the dead fire. "And they still didn't wait, the bastards. To hell with them. It's time we had a bite to eat too, lad."

Loktiev got out his bag of food and climbed out of the cabin. He liked eating outside, particularly when it wasn't very cold. It was a sunny, calm day, just right. The larches were bare and interspersed with the dark green of stunted firs. There was one growing by the fire. Loktiev looked for a branch to hang up his bag, but could not find one and put it on a dry log that one of the drivers who liked his bit of comfort had dragged out of the forest.

There was a smaller dark patch next to the fire. Somebody had obviously been too impatient to wait for the communal bucket and had heated water with a blow lamp in his bowl. Loktiev kicked the dead embers with the tip of his boot. There was a smell of burning in the fresh forest air, but after the stink of petrol in the cabin this was pleasant too.

Loktiev sat down on the log and took off his fur cap. It was so quiet the air seemed to ring.

As soon as he took the food out of his bag two Siberian jays flew up and began to squabble in disgusting squawks, chasing each other from branch to branch on the larches a stone's throw away from him.

"Sharing out the crumbs, are you," Loktiev muttered. He did not like these noisy northern birds, just as he did not like magpies in his native parts. He took the rind off some sausage and threw it to them. "Eat that, you little devils, and be grateful."

The birds fell silent for a moment and each turned a beady eye on Loktiev. Then one took advantage of the pause to land heavily in the snow, peck up the sausage rind and fly off low into the forest with its booty, followed by its friend squawking angrily.

Loktiev ate well and heartily, washing the food down with strong tea. He did not need a fire. He always carried a two-litre thermos flask with tropical flowers on it. Putting the leftovers back into the bag, Loktiev stretched out full length on the snow before lighting a cigarette. The snow was so dry and powdery that a thin cloud rose all round him and then settled again. He was still bare-headed, but did not feel the cold. Even his bare hands, thrown back under his head, enjoyed the gentle brittleness of the snow. It was cool, like a summer breeze in a stuffy cabin, not cold.

Say what you like, but it's a good life when you've got

a job, fur-lined boots and trousers and a fur-lined jacket. At moments like this Loktiev thought blasphemous things. He thought that if he was the only person left on earth, it wouldn't matter as long as he had his lorry. He could even have a nap in the snow like this. But he must get a move on. He wasn't the only person left on earth. Ahead of him was the convoy which he must try to catch up, at least by nightfall.

"Ee, lad," he said loudly, enjoying the sound of his own voice. "Makes you feel like singing." He got up abruptly, shook his shoulders, brushed the snow from his back, and went over to the lorry.

The engine revved at once, obedient as usual. The windscreen had iced over. Loktiev switched on the wiper and it removed the thin crust of ice briskly with a few strokes, pushing it to the side. He should have wiped the glass with a rag, but for some reason he felt too lazy, which was unusual for him. He pressed down the clutch, put her in gear and the winter road began to race towards him, smooth and even.

"This is good enough for taxi drivers," Loktiev grinned, placing his arms more comfortably on the wheel.

He planned to drive for several hours at least, but after he had taken a long rise of about ten kilometres, crossed the bed of a frozen stream at full speed, and turned right on the opposite bank he almost drove into the leader's lorry. Loktiev braked so suddenly that his ZIL slewed round at right angles to the road.

"That's a fine place to stop," he shouted furiously, leaping out of the cabin onto the snow.

"So you've turned up at last." The leader came round his lorry and inspected the back. "Didn't dent it, did you? You're a fast one." The leader smiled and the steel teeth in his black gypsy's beard flashed.

"Why have you stopped?" Loktiev asked annoyed.

"Waiting for you, sailor boy. We missed you. Had dinner? There's time to eat, we're in no hurry. Going to spend the night here."

"What the blazes for? We've only just started."

"It's the river, lad. The ice is a bit thin."

Loktiev looked at the leader and said nothing.

"What are you goggling at, gorgeous. The ice is a bit thin, see? The forecast for tonight is twenty-five. So it'll

freeze hard in the night and by tomorrow morning we can be on our way."

"Have you gone up the creek? We've just crossed the stream. It was frozen right through."

"It's only a stream. And not right through. There's a bend here. The water on the ice is steaming. Who knows what would happen. If the ice broke you'd wet your sparking plugs and that would be that. It's not deep, but no one's got waders. We could get into a right mess," the leader concluded.

"A tractor's been across..."

"Yes, but a tractor has tracks and weighs half what we do with our loads."

"You're all full up, and I'm travelling almost empty." Loktiev shot an angry glance at the humped back of his lorry.

"Want to give it a try?" the leader grinned slyly.

"You don't think I want to spend the night here stuck in the cabin? I could be in Perevalny by morning."

"I shouldn't let you go off on your own," the leader said a little uncertainly, and Loktiev realised he couldn't wait to test the ice, but was afraid of sending one of the full lorries.

"I get it, boss," he said, climbed into the driver's seat and, almost hitting some other lorries, set off to overtake the convoy, driving down to the river in first gear. The leader stood on the running board and shouted after him:

"If anything goes wrong, we'll haul you back. Nobody wants to spend the night here. If you get across, we'll have a go. And if need be you can help the first man over to the other side with a cable. We'll go over one by one like that."

"And if I was still back there, who would help me over?" Sergei immediately saw himself in the leading role. "You didn't wait for me."

The leader winked guiltily.

"You're an ace, lad. The others were grousing. And the road was a piece of cake."

"I won't be the last to load up next time, not on your nelly." Sergei ignored the leader's excuses, alluding to his half-empty lorry.

"I bet you won't. But who could have known that would happen? I'm almost always the last to load."

"Okay. Get off the running board. I want to go straight over..."

Nearly all the drivers were standing on the bank. They kept looking at the ice, then at the approaching lorry and moved aside unhurriedly to get out of Loktiev's way.

Sergei went into third, pressed on the accelerator and drove onto the ice. The lorry did not skid. It obeyed the wheel. He was probably driving in the tractor's tracks. Only in the middle of the river did she begin to dip to the right, but before Sergei realised what was happening he had reached the opposite bank safely.

He looked out of the cabin. The drivers who had let him through, standing in a line along the river's edge like an audience, had clustered up together again and were staring in his direction. Loktiev thought that even if he had been bound to crash through the ice, he would still have risked it.

"What are we going to do now?" he shouted to the drivers.

There was no reply. The drivers were no longer interested in him. They were shouting and gesticulating, discussing what to do. Some were "for" and some "against". Two of the keenest kept running onto the ice and were yelling some kind of encouragement. "They're from the middle of the convoy," Loktiev thought wrily.

After stamping on the ice for a bit the two went back to the others, gesticulating, but they were obviously in the minority, and returned sullenly to their lorries, which were indeed in the middle of the convoy.

The leader walked down to the river. He did not go onto the ice, but cupped his hands and shouted to Loktiev,

"Did you list to one side in the middle, lad?"

"It's all okay," Loktiev replied. He now wanted the whole convoy to get across and reach the drivers' hostel by tomorrow morning. He did not know why his lorry had begun to keel over, but because of the unfathomable laws of human psychology he wanted the risk he had taken to be shared by the others. Loktiev sincerely believed in luck.

The leader stamped around a bit and turned his head to make sure nothing was in the way, then nodded to the first lorry.

The crowd of drivers began to move with a sense of purpose, as always happens when the person in charge puts

an end to the debating and assumes the responsibility. The drivers went off to their lorries, taking their disappointment and submission with them. What was the point of all the gassing? He should have told them straightaway to get on with it. Only the driver of the first lorry stood alone, his cap pulled down over his forehead, not moving. Perhaps he was hoping the leader would change his mind at the last moment, but the latter waved him on.

The driver climbed reluctantly into his cabin. He had got used to the idea that he would spend the night here, in the lorry, and it was hard for him to readjust. The engine roared, the lorry started, then stopped for a moment (the driver must have forgotten to release the hand brake), and began slowly, as if by force of inertia, to roll down the slope. It was a fairly steep slope and the lorry skidded down in bottom gear.

"Step on the gas, you idiot," Loktiev stood on the running board, watching the descent and advising the driver to do what he would have done in the circumstances. "Faster, you fathead." The driver could not hear him, of course, nor did he see the leader waving to him to take it more quickly. The driver saw only the ice, covered with a thin, slightly steaming film of water, and thought that since he had been ordered to sink, he'd better do it near the bank and not in midstream. He was disciplined, but not very keen. He drove in bottom gear, like a learner, braking convulsively almost every few feet and making the lorry bump along.

"Leapfrogging across like that," Lotkiev thought angrily, imagining how neatly he would have got across.

The lorry's front wheels drove onto the ice and it stopped. The engine had stalled. Through force of habit the driver turned the wheel first right, then left, as if he was trying to break the ice, instead of get to the other side. And he succeeded. Just as he switched on the ignition in an effort to get the engine running again, the front wheels began to sink down gently as if they were folding up into the lorry. Then it shuddered convulsively, the bumper broke the ice ahead, the headlights disappeared into the water and the engine stalled as the wheels reached the bottom.

"And serves you bloody well right," said Loktiev.

"Some people will make a mess of tying their bootlaces."

The leader did not even go up to the lorry. He climbed up the bank with the lethargic gait of a disappointed man, thinking more or less the same as Loktiev. The drivers again clustered together on the bank. All of them, those who had been in favour of going across and those who had not, now thought that they could have made it. At least each of them could have made it in that lorry. The most surprising thing was that the driver of the first lorry also thought that given another chance he would have crossed safely and be standing next to Loktiev, having a quiet smoke and watching the others get over. But since he was not to get another chance, he sat with his elbows on the wheel in no hurry to climb out of the lorry. He would have to get the cable out of the back, and it was old, rusty and bristly as a hedgehog. He hadn't used it for a long time, and it was lying somewhere under his load. It would be hard to fish it out and even harder to ask the other drivers. He wanted to put off the evil moment as long as possible.

A few minutes earlier he had been the loudest to shout that they should spend the night here and wait till the ice was stronger. Perhaps if he had not stuck to his guns and not tried to show he was right, the whole convoy would be on the other side, each hour bringing them nearer home, although they were driving away from it. It occurred to him that there was no point in spending the night here now, because the hole he had made in the ice with his wheels would freeze over by morning, but wouldn't be strong enough to take the lorries. They would have to build a road of brushwood, and although the river wasn't very wide that would be a sweat, particularly as the drivers' axes... What axes... His own axe was lying in the cabin with a blade so blunt you could toboggan on it. All this made the driver feel guilty.

Loktiev walked down to the river and watched the drivers dragging the first logs onto the ice. They brought everything: rotten dead branches pulled off without an axe, slender twisted larches chopped down any old how and branches which they used to bind the logs into a makeshift raft and cover the surface. They'd be lucky if they got it done by nightfall. And all this was because of one

cowardly or clumsy blockhead. Loktiev should have been there, in the forest, where the sound of blunt axes and voices rang. But that was the last thing he wanted. After all, he had been the first to risk the crossing. Why should he carry the can for some stupid nitwit. Incidentally the nitwit was not fetching wood. They had hauled his lorry out, and he was tinkering about with the engine, casting occasional disapproving glances at Loktiev. This made Sergei furious. He thought that if it were not for that simple Simon (the driver's name really was Simon) he would go and drag logs and branches without a murmur. But since that thickhead thought he had the right to blame Loktiev, he wouldn't raise a finger.

Loktiev waited for the leader, who eventually appeared carrying a long tree trunk, its top making patterns in the snow. It was all the leader could manage, and the weight made him bite his bushy beard and stagger from side to side, leaving a serpentine track behind him. He slipped on the slope and would probably have been crushed by the butt end, if Simon had not run over and held the trunk. They dragged it to the place together. Free of his load, the leader coughed, swore and bent down from the waist to give his back a rest. It was not a very good moment to talk to him, but Loktiev decided to all the same.

"Do you need me now, Yegorich?" he asked.

The leader muttered something still bent double. The muttering did not sound very promising.

"Tell me what to do. You're the leader!"

Loktiev felt a bit awkward. He realised that what he had said sounded like "I don't need you now."

The leader straightened up abruptly and looked past Loktiev, the bluish whites of his gypsy eyes shining.

"Go to blazes, if you don't know what to do."

The driver Simon lowered his eyes guiltily and went off to his machine.

"Don't stand there gloating. I give you permission to go. That's official."

The leader turned round and went back up the slope to the forest, shaking his shoulders to stop his wet shirt from sticking to his back.

"Well, if that's official, then I'm off," said Loktiev defiantly.

He sat in the lorry for a while. "Give them the chance and they'd hang on your neck and pull you down," he thought, to persuade himself that he was right. He turned the ignition key calmly, with the confidence of a man who was acting as he should. The ZIL agreed with him entirely, and in a few minutes Loktiev's driving mirror did not show the convoy or Simon messing about with the engine, only a cloud of snow and exhaust fumes that hung low over the winter road and settled quickly.

The road was not so good now, but still good enough to do a steady eighty, even ninety on some stretches. There were lots of rises and slopes, but Loktiev took them almost without decelerating, and if he had to brake now and then he did it smoothly and skilfully.

He was a first-rate driver and when people called him an ace he took this as a statement of fact, not as flattery. The lack of skill in other drivers, particularly those who had been driving for a long time, upset him. He remembered how Simon had stalled going down the bank and snorted contemptuously. But the further he drew away from the convoy, the less confident he became that he was right, and this magnified Simon's guilt out of all proportion. Beside Simon's stupidity, Loktiev's anger with the store-woman the Beautiful Helen for his half-empty lorry faded into the background. Since he was a first-class driver perhaps they really had entrusted some fragile load to him, instruments or such like. Put them in Simon's lorry and they would get smashed to smithereens. But Loktiev would deliver them safe and sound, as good as by aeroplane. In the morning he would tell Larissa he was carrying instruments for geophysicists so sensitive that they could not be sent by air. He'd say the convoy chief himself had supervised the loading. Larissa would listen with her mouth open and her eyes shining with pleasure. He knew his Larissa. And he'd finish as he always did! by asking her: "And if one gets shaken to a jelly on a run, it's not the fault of the road or the lorry, is it? Who's to blame? Not the road or the lorry, but..."

She would look at him, put her arms round him, press against his cheek and whisper in his ear: "Bighead."

And he would press her to him, not roughly, but strongly and tightly, so that all her words and weak resistance lost their meaning. And only the fact that they were

so close and dear to each other would have any meaning. And that feeling would stay with him for many days. It would return to him at the most unexpected moments.

Loktiev sat back in the seat, stretching his tired back, his fingers barely touching the wheel. Then he felt a real physical pain in his heart. That was not why he was going to see Larissa. There would be nothing, no tenderness or affection, nothing but unpleasant conversation, cold, lying words. He would tell her the truth, but it would be a lie. And it was all the fault of Simon who had gone through the ice where it would have been so easy to drive straight over. It was Simon's fault that Loktiev had not stayed with the rest, and that they all thought him a rotten bastard now. And in the morning he would be rude to Larissa, even scornfully rude, all because of Simon.

The fact that he had decided to break with her a long time ago did not matter. If Simon hadn't gone through the ice, he would have driven with the rest of the convoy and they would all have stopped for supper and made tea so strong that your spoon stood up in it and shared their provisions with one another. Loktiev would have opened his block of Inter and offered them round. They probably would not like the tobacco and compare it unfavourably with Prima, say, but Loktiev would have felt good because none of them refused. "Other people's fags taste nicer." Nobody would have praised Loktiev out loud, perhaps, but secretly they would all have thought that he was a good lad. And somebody would probably have said, "Steady on, boys. That's enough scrounging. You've smoked nearly a packet each. He's taking them to his girl." "She doesn't smoke," Loktiev would say, although Larissa did smoke and he used to try and bring her some good cigarettes. "Loktiev's not the sort to take up with a bint that smokes. His girl's a real lady."

Loktiev knew that none of the drivers had ever seen Larissa, but he would not have minded.

"Is she a good lass, then?" someone would have asked him. "Well, she's got what it takes." "Then you marry her quick. A good woman's hard to find these days." "I wanted to sort it out. But the leader won't give me leave. Let me stay for twenty-four hours, Yegorich. I'll catch you up."

Yegorich would probably have let him, particularly

when the drivers shouted in unison: "Come on, Yegorich. Can't miss a chance like that. The family's the pillar of society, you know." It might have turned out like that, and then again it might not. But now it almost certainly wouldn't...

It was beginning to get dark. The trees' shadows slanting across the road obscured the potholes, and the lorry sometimes bumped quite hard, which wasn't so good for the instruments in the back. "Ace or not, I'll be delivering a load of smashed glass, if I'm not careful," Loktiev reprimanded himself.

He turned on the sidelights, trying to avoid all the uneven patches of untravelled winter road. The hands on the dials quivered and the numbers on the speedometer clicked over regularly. It was rather stuffy in the cabin, but he did not feel drowsy yet. True, he could already feel a fatigue that made his hands heavy, forced him to turn his stiff neck and poisoned his thoughts with indifference to what had happened and what would happen.

Loktiev was beginning not to care what the drivers who had probably not finished the brushwood path yet, thought of him. He was no longer angry with Simon and even thought that Simon was not to blame for anything. And he, Loktiev, had done as he wanted. There was no point in pretending and lying to yourself. Even if the convoy had got over safely, he would still have tried to go on ahead and get to Perevalny as soon as possible. And he would still have told Larissa what he had made up his mind to tell her.

In the spring he would go and live with his mother and try to get work on the timber convoys. He knew that they transported timber from the North to the state farm every winter. Like before he wouldn't spend much time at home, but they must keep some livestock. It was ridiculous to live in the country and not keep livestock. And the vegetable garden had to be tended. How Larissa could manage that with her college education and weak arms, Loktiev just could not imagine. And it was obviously time that mother took it easy. That was the truth of the matter. What was he to do—hire a home help, or what?

You had to take a simple view of life, not complicate things. So he wouldn't complicate things either. "We're

simple folk with simple needs, a full purse and a full stomach."

Loktiev lit a cigarette, opened the side window slightly and tried not to think about anything any more. But since the thoughts kept coming, he decided to sing. It was pitch dark and the ZIL was cutting through the night coolly but persistently with its headlights. Loktiev sang loudly and out of tune, making his own head ring.

*A sharp bend and a steep slope*
*Hold the wheel fast, driver*
*If you don't want your sweetheart to cry.*

Loktiev's voice escaped through the window of the cabin. It must have been strange for the wild animals to hear these sounds in places where the nearest dwelling was three hundred kilometres away. But there are lots of strange things in life.

Loktiev was oblivious to all that. He was singing. The songs came of their own accord. He did not know a single one right through. The words and tune were not important for him. "The wheels they rumbled on the rails" turned into "A big round sun" which was actually a repeat of the wheel, and even the sad story of the driver and his old AMO, which he knew almost all the words of, left him cold.

He finally grew tired of singing as people get tired of shouting. His throat was dry and his head felt heavy. "Right you are," said Loktiev. He braked, got out his thermos flask and took a few deep gulps. It grew hot, and his vision improved. The winter road was rushing towards him like a narrow passage with barriers of impenetrable darkness and infinite height on either side.

Loktiev was no longer disturbed by thoughts. His brain was asleep. Only a tiny area containing the ten-month driving course and his six years of driving experience was still alert.

Several hours passed. Loktiev was neither asleep nor awake. He was driving. And worrying about the road. There was a long stretch of frozen marshland ahead, the most treacherous part of the route. If his wheels were to break through the crust of the frozen mud, the lorry would sink in up to the shafts and that would be that. When

they were in a convoy, they took the frozen marsh, like the treacherous ice on the rivers, one by one with a big gap between them.

It was a very cold night. His cheek could feel it through the side window. The cold had started early this year, but still there was no guarantee that the marsh was sufficiently hard. It wasn't January.

Loktiev kept glancing at the speedometer. He knew approximately when the marsh would begin. It was impossible to guess in advance what it would be like. The marsh wasn't a river. You couldn't take it in one fell swoop. But he wanted to know where he was.

In spite of this he did not notice when the forest road stopped and the marshland began.

The headlights unexpectedly picked out a strange object in the snow by the roadside, a metal frame with some wire netting. Loktiev stopped the lorry and took a closer look, but could not decide what the object was. He climbed down from the cabin and went up to it. It was a frame and a grid. Then suddenly it dawned upon him: it was from a bed. How could it have got here? Loktiev looked round. His eyes had got used to the darkness. He was surrounded by an open expanse of snow. That must be the marsh. How much of it he had already covered, Loktiev could not say, but he had a good idea how the metal frame had got here. Someone had stuck it under his wheels. Some poor blighter had been carrying beds and got stuck. He had probably tried everything, putting something under the wheels, switching from reverse to first and back and perhaps even sticking his own coat under the wheels, before misappropriating public property.

How it had all ended, whether he had managed to get out or his mates had helped him, Loktiev did not know. All that was certain was that this little drama of the road had been acted out last year. The grid had got frozen into the ground and Loktiev himself had probably driven over it several times. But this year it had been dislodged and set up by the roadside like a warning sign.

Loktiev shook the grid. It gave slightly. He pulled it out of the snow and threw it in the back of the lorry. "Might come in handy."

It was 4 a.m. Even if he were right at the beginning of the marsh, he would be over it in an hour if he didn't

get stuck, and then the road was a cinch. He'd get to the settlement about nine. Larissa would be at home. She didn't have to go to the library until twelve. By the time he'd washed and shaved, she would have to go. He would have a sleep until she came home, and then... Then he would tell her everything, and would probably have to spend the night in the lorry-drivers' hostel.

The headlights bored into the night. This was the most dangerous time. He felt drowsy, but fought against it, chain smoking and gulping tea from his thermos flask without stopping.

About thirty-six or forty-eight hours at the wheel—that fitted in with his idea of an ace-driver. When he had crossed the marsh, he might let himself doze off for thirty minutes. Perhaps...

When you really want to sleep, you lose your sense of time, and if you have no watch you can never say how much time has passed—ten minutes, an hour, how much you have done and how much there is to do. Loktiev drove for half an hour, looking at his watch only twice. So he still has some strength left, and the tea helped, of course. He told himself that he would wait another forty minutes before looking at his watch again. By then the marsh would probably have finished and he would be on dry land.

"To reach dry ground" he repeated to himself in different pitches: high-pitched like a child, then loud, then in a whisper. Sometimes with a long and sometimes a short pause between each word. And he changed the order so as not to be lulled by the monotony.

"To reach dry ground, dry ground to reach." There were few variations, and he added "to" in front of each word: "To, to, to reach, to dry..." It was not easy to work in the stuffy cabin at four o'clock in the morning. His temples throbbed. Sergei began to swear: "To reach what blasted dry ground?"

But this did not help for long either. The words began to turn into pictures before him. The dry ground rolled from side to side of the road like a big grey millstone, and Loktiev felt the urge to chase it, to turn the wheel this way and that, and the wheel was no longer a driving wheel but had changed into the handlebars of a bicycle. And he was not driving along a winter road at night, but cycling

down a path to the river on a sunny summer morning where the fishermen had cast their lines.

Loktiev shook his head. He saw a shadow or pothole ahead and thought: "I'll stop when I get to that." Then he picked the next landmark: "I'll stop when I get to that."

"That's enough, sweetheart," he said finally, banging the wheel and switching off the engine. "We've reached dry ground."

At that very moment he felt one of the wheels of his faithful ZIL buckle, like a leg collapsing from fatigue.

Loktiev switched on the ignition feverishly. The engine whined. The lorry jerked, but stayed where it was.

"We're stuck, old girl," Loktiev whispered, glancing mechanically at his watch. It was twenty to five. He was not surprised that only ten minutes had passed since he started his tricks to ward off sleep. He flung himself back heavily in the seat, banging the back of his head, and felt the pain and the flow of time. His sleepiness had gone.

About twelve hours later the convoy arrived at the spot where Loktiev's ZIL had "twisted her ankle". Simon was at the head as before. He stopped by the deep rut, about two hundred metres long, and leaned against the steering wheel until the other drivers arrived.

"The stubborn beggar," said the leader, shaking his head. "He'd drag himself out by the hair with his teeth. Just to show that he's in the clear."

"He's a nasty piece of work," said Simon.

"No, just a fool. He's never been up against it."

The drivers cleared away the snowbank by the roadside with spades and then drove round the dangerous spot through the snow in first gear, digging themselves out and giving one another a haul if necessary.

It took them a good hour of hard work, and there were a lot of them. Loktiev had managed it on his own. They were angry with him, but gave him his due. It's easier to forgive the strong than the weak...

...Loktiev himself could not understand how he had managed to get out. By the time his lorry reached dry ground and did not stall or sink, he was on his last legs. Right until dawn he had been digging furiously with the spade, and stuffing under the wheels first a piece of tar-

paulin from the sheet covering his load, then the bed grid, then branches from a dwarf birch tree. He was ready to lie down under the wheels himself.

He drove a few metres along the dry ground, then looked back at his work with eyes crazed from fatigue. He wasn't surprised, but simply could not believe it.

"Must get some sleep," he said to himself. "Or you'll be done for."

He could not sleep, however. His smart fur-lined jacket was soaked with sweat and slush. While he had been rushing backwards and forwards from the cabin to the wheels, he had not felt the cold. His suit had not even frosted over. It was only steaming. But as soon as Loktiev sat down at the wheel and drove for a few minutes, he began to shake like a jelly. And went on shaking until he reached the settlement.

"You mustn't get ill," he said to himself firmly. "A half-empty lorry is quite enough trouble."

Larissa was still at home, although it was already one o'clock. Loktiev went in without knocking. He just pushed the door and staggered into Larissa's room, wet and shaking, probably quite a frightening sight. Larissa was sitting at the table, sideways on to him. Next to her lay a pile of exercise books and a mug with some bright red flowers. It was a big and familiar mug. Loktiev always drank his tea out of it. So you could say it was his mug.

Larissa was wearing her usual, flannel dressing gown in small red and black check. But she was not the same Larissa. That is, the woman sitting at the table and turning towards him a blotchy face bore a resemblance to Larissa, but at first Loktiev decided it must be her elder sister on a visit. If he had been in a fit condition to say anything he would certainly have asked where Larissa was.

He himself probably looked like his non-existent elder brother or some other relation, because it was some time before the bewilderment in Larissa's eyes changed into fright, and then a mixture of anxiety, pity and warmth appeared in these frightened eyes that were Larissa's without a doubt.

She remained seated, but was inwardly reaching out for him.

"What's the matter? What's happened?"

He threw off his jacket, sweater and shirt, still damp with sweat, in dark patches on the chest and back.

He shook his head. "Nothing's happened." And continued to take off his clothes and boots and foot bindings. Then he stood in his socks and the funny driver's trousers up to his armpits and began to warm himself. The hairs were still standing up on his bare arms, but a rush of warmth spread down his back and his cheeks were beginning to glow as if from shame, only his lips would not obey him and he couldn't even manage a smile. And he wanted to ask the same question that Larissa had asked him: "What's the matter? What is it?"

It spoke for itself in any case: her blotchy face and her big belly. For some reason she kept trying to hide it, to cover it with her shawl. But he wanted to ask her all the same.

Larissa read the question in his eyes, grew embarrassed and tried even harder to conceal her belly.

By the time Loktiev had warmed up and felt able to talk, her belly had ceased to have any effect on him. He imagined that she had always had a large belly, even when he first met her at the dance in the Club. He felt attracted to her in the same way as he had then. But he felt no other feelings for her. He could talk now and tell her about his mother, the half-empty lorry, the instruments he was carrying, and how he had got stuck and managed to get out, but he did not know whether he should talk about such things in the circumstances or how to begin. So he kept silent.

"I've got some teaching at night school," Larissa said. "There aren't enough teachers. I expect that's why they took me. It's the eighth form, literature and Russian." She picked up some exercise books by the corners and they fanned out. The cover of one was stained by a glass of tea or coffee. "Most of the pupils are quite old. They don't play up. There's even an old-age pensioner."

"I bet he's the one who stands his tea on his exercise book," thought Loktiev. "He's got nothing to lose." He immediately felt a strong dislike for the old-age pensioner. He had probably spent his life in some cushy job, worried about being semi-literate, and had now decided to show what he was made of. He'd taken it easy. He hadn't worked himself to death.

"Why are you hanging about by the door, Sergei? Why don't you come over here?" said Larissa. Her voice was normal and homely. "At first I thought you were drunk."

"I'm wet through and frozen stiff," said Sergei, irritatedly, although he knew that he had no right to be irritated.

"Well, why didn't you say so? I'll give you your track suit and you can change into that." Her voice was still deliberately calm. She got up slowly, leaning heavily on the table, and went over to the window, waddling slightly, where there was a pile of clean washing on a chair by the radiator. His track suit was lying on top.

"She was waiting for me," Loktiev thought, but his irritation dit not abate. "Perhaps she was, but she didn't greet me like she usually does. She didn't seem all that pleased."

"Here. It's nice and warm," said Larissa. They looked into each other's eyes for the first time. Larissa's expression was calm, clear and friendly. This was how she had looked at the readers when Loktiev dropped into the library to leaf through some magazines. And this was probably how she looked at her old-age pensioner pupils.

"Surely she can't have guessed why I've come," he thought suddenly. "And what now? It's my child. Or is it?"

And because he was capable of thinking such thoughts, Loktiev began to feel a real bastard. He took the track suit and turned away.

"You change and I'll put the kettle on. Do you want some alcohol? I've got a little. It's for medicinal use, not for drinking."

Loktiev didn't want to change or to drink tea or alcohol. He wanted to be in the drivers' hostel, to stuff his wet armour on the radiator, snuggle under a wadded blanket with a faded yellow bedspread and sleep, sleep until it seemed that everything he had seen here was just a dream. But he leant his stiff trousers against the wall, began pulling on his track suit, trying to balance on one foot, and gave two hearty shouts of approval concerning tea and, in particular, alcohol. They were meant to indicate that he was pleased and happy, and that Larissa was a good girl, a real brick, who knew what to give a man who was frozen stiff and hadn't slept for twenty-four hours.

To him these exclamations sounded very forced, but behind the partition Larissa began to clatter the dishes in a more energetic, even cheerful fashion.

What if he told her right now, without tea or alcohol, without even sitting down, point blank. Starting with the fact that they had not agreed to have a child, that she had not even consulted him. And that he wasn't sure... He had other plans. The situation had changed. Just say that and see what happened.

"Are you looking for your slippers?" Larissa emerged from the partition. Her face really did look flushed and pleased.

"They're over there. Have a good look. I'll fry up some minced sausage and powdered egg."

"Rightho," said Sergei gaily and began to hunt through Larissa's pile of shoes, although he was already wearing his slippers.

"And smooth your hair down," she said, when he got up and looked at her in embarrassment. "You look as if you've come through a hedge backwards."

"Rightho," he repeated meaninglessly. He finally came into the room, leafed through the exercise books on the table and glanced at the titles of the books on the book shelf. There seemed to be more than before.

"Why does she buy books? She's a librarian. She can read as much as she likes."

Loktiev picked a small book at random from the shelf. The cover showed a musketeer in a lace collar. "Montaigne," Sergei read the name of the musketeer. *Essays. On the art of living nobly.* "What does that mean? Not putting your knife in your mouth or eating a chicken with your fingers?" Loktiev read something printed lower down, that he had not noticed before. Children's Literature Publishers. "That'll do." He pushed the musketeer back on the shelf. Whenever he picked up a book Larissa would ask him what he'd read lately. He was afraid she would come in now and ask. He didn't like that sort of question. It was quite irrelevant now anyway. He did read, of course. Not very often, it was true, and not very much. When his lorry was being overhauled, for example. Or before he went to sleep. There was always a book or two lying about in the hostel. He might pick one up and read it if there was nothing on telly. But what the title was

and who wrote it, he couldn't remember for the life of him. Sometimes he would have liked to know, but the first or last pages were missing. But Larissa had the professional approach. Like a doctor who asks you where it hurts, she would ask what he was reading. "We listen to the radio mostly," Loktiev usually replied.

There was an appetising sound coming from the kitchen, but Loktiev didn't feel hungry. He was overtired and had smoked too much. He could still keep awake, but his eyelids were burning and his eyes hurt. His mouth had a stale taste, but he would still have liked a cigarette. He probably shouldn't smoke in here now. There was no ashtray on the table.

There was something different about the room in general. Loktiev looked around him. The divan bed with the check plaid cover and the small cushion, the table, the four chairs, the wardrobe, the stool with the pile of old magazines. He usually moved them onto the floor and put the stool by the bed at night for the ashtray. Was it only the ashtray that had disappeared and everything else was the same? No, he must have forgotten. How long was it since his last visit? Six months? Yes. Actually seven. To be more precise seven months and ten days. Loktiev had worked it out before he left and now he remembered his calculations. What else was different? He must think.

He strained his memory. For some reason he saw the musketeer and Children's Literature Publishers. Why children's books? Surely she wasn't collecting them for the child already? Well, Larissa really had put him in a spot, no mistake about it.

Loktiev waited, thinking that perhaps his heart would miss a beat. People say that's what happens in cases like this... Or he would feel some call of the blood. No. He felt nothing but indifference to his future heir and irritation with Larissa. Firstly, her unexpectedly large belly was a kind of blow below the belt, and, secondly, sensible people make provision first, but she starts by buying books. Just like her... He must ask about a layette.

His mind was still made up as before, although now the conversation would be even more awful. "But perhaps not for her," he thought hopefully. After all, he'd never made any promises, had he? He might have been sent on a different run or moved to Magadan where a new plant was

being set up. Five drivers had gone there already. And he wasn't here yet, in a manner of speaking. His convoy was stuck out in the marshes. Finally, he might have gone off to the mainland as soon as he got his mother's first letter. Larissa was with her relatives in the Ukraine then. Sergei had no address, no nothing. They would never have met again. Fate's a funny thing. She was keeping quiet, not saying anything, as if nothing had happened. He'd been afraid she would say, "I love you. Don't leave me." Afraid of her crying. But she was quite calm. "So your son won't have a father, that's all," she would say. "I knew it. I'll bring him up on my own. With Montaigne." So be it. He didn't mind. But Montaigne wouldn't bring much money home, and a librarian's wage was nothing much. She'd already started giving lessons to old-age pensioners. How would she manage later?

He would tell Larissa that he would send her money for the boy until he was eighteen. Every month, like he did to his mother. Even if he got married, he'd still send it secretly. He'd start by telling her that.

"Come here, Sergei. It's ready," Larissa called.

Loktiev rubbed his chin furiously and went to wash his hands. What else could he do?

They ate at the kitchen table. There was no room for their legs. Loktiev's knee kept brushing against Larissa's. He didn't want this to happen, but couldn't take his leg away. He'd never felt awkward about it before, but how easily he was embarrassed now.

Loktiev drank the spirit. His eyes began to hurt even more and he felt dizzy. Larissa's knee was warm, and he felt like saying something warm to her too. To stop himself talking, Sergei gobbled up the northern omelette with minced sausage, although he was sick and tired of it.

Larissa played around with her fork, giving him understanding and even slightly indulgent glances, as if he were a child.

"Hungry?"

"Umm." Sergei chewed even more heartily, although he could not taste the food, then choked and coughed for a minute.

"Wash it down with tea, Sergei. The omelette's a bit dry."

"You eat too," Loktiev said, to his surprise. "You must eat properly now."

Larissa blushed, looked down at her plate, and obediently began to eat up, eventually coughing like Sergei. He pushed his mug towards her.

She took it, blushing even harder so that the blotches on her cheekbones were hardly noticeable and she looked prettier.

Sergei was almost asleep. He knew he should not resist, and was magnanimous.

How little a woman needs! He'd been away for six months and hadn't hugged her, kissed her or said a single nice word to her, yet as soon as something popped out she was melting and glowing with delight. What a person she was! She should take him by the gills and give it to him straight. But there she was blushing.

"You go straight to bed when you've finished. There are circles under your eyes."

"Yes, I'll have a sleep."

"You can smoke if you like while I'm making up the bed. Then it's time I went off to school."

Sergei's cigarettes were in his jacket. First he opened the door to smoke through the crack, but then he went out into the corridor. Pregnant women were very sensitive to everything, he thought.

A young girl in hair rollers and a very short housecoat came into the corridor from the street. She did not notice Loktiev at first, slammed the door, shutting out the blast of cold air that came in after her, and stamped on the mat, shaking the snow off and shivering. "Ee, it cuts right through you." But as soon as their eyes met, she looked different. She seemed to stretch up on tiptoe and walked past Sergei, waving her empty slops bucket as if it were a smart handbag.

Loktiev remembered the girl from his previous visits. She had often come to Larissa to ask for some tea or a glass, but he pretended not to know her and turned away. The girl snorted indignantly and disappeared through a door at the end of the corridor. "She's got something to gossip about now." Loktiev twisted the cigarette end into a tight tube and stuck it behind a slat.

"I must hurry," Larissa had her coat on.

She was obviously too heavy to do much hurrying. The buttons on her old fur coat had been moved right to the edge.

"Alright," said Loktiev, moving aside to let her pass. "You have a good sleep."

Loktiev fell asleep almost before he had time to think how reckless women are. He thought he had only slept for a minute or two, because he awoke with the same idea.

It was light and quiet in the room. Next to the bed was the stool with the ashtray and a note that said: "Spent the night with my friend next door. Have gone to school for the first shift. Back at two. Eat anything you can find. There's tea and condensed milk. Larissa."

The clock said half past ten the next morning.

"Not bad," Loktiev said aloud. "I feel better for that."

He swung his legs from under the blanket and jumped out. Then he stretched up and stood on his toes. His head felt clear and his body light. He wanted to be nice to people.

Why should he spoil his own mood and Larissa's? What was the point? He would have a wash now and go round the shops. There were only two in any case. And he'd buy things for the bady, everything she needed. Perhaps he'd even get a bottle of champagne in the depot and have a drink before he left; they'd drink to the health of the mother-to-be and the son or daughter, to an easy delivery and to everything nice. He'd make no promises, but leave a little hope. He could tell her the rest in a letter. That would be better, because it wasn't the moment to talk about money. But he would send some for sure.

Loktiev drank some cold tea quickly and ate a sandwich.

"First I'll go round to the hostel. To see the leader."

The hostel was just across the street. The lorries were standing quietly, covered with frost. "The lads are asleep. Must have arrived late."

Loktiev opened the first door he came to and almost collided with the leader. He was trimming his bushy beard with a razor. The mirror was hanging on the door. The leader moved aside. Loktiev shouted into the room:

"Doing alright, lads!"

Three more drivers, already dressed, were lying on the bunks. There was a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"The same to you," one replied sullenly. The others said nothing.

"I'm a sod, lads." Loktiev subdued his perky manner

somewhat. "But you see how it is. My girl here's expecting. Otherwise I wouldn't have..." He didn't say what he would have done otherwise, and turned to the leader.

"I'm sorry about that..."

"That's enough apologizing. We're not at play school," said the leader. "Not done yourself an injury yet?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you will sometime, if you go on being a loner."

"I haven't done myself an injury, but I can't change into third. It's the fifth time I've tried and the gears keep jamming." Loktiev hadn't meant to lie. It had just slipped out.

"Go to the geologists' garage. Take a look at it in the pit," the leader said.

"That's what I wanted to do. When are we leaving?"

"We'll have a bite and then be on our way."

"I probably won't have time."

"Of course, you won't. How can you, if your girl's expecting." The leader winked at the other drivers. "Leave tomorrow as soon as it's light. No, let's say at four of five a.m. We'll spend the night at Kuzmich's at the petrol station. You catch us up there! Got it?"

"Women are nothing but trouble," Loktiev heard through the door. "That lad hasn't slept all night, then he arrives and misses another night's sleep, I'll bet."

"Not if she's expecting."

"When did he manage to fix that up?"

"He's had her for a long time.

Loktiev did not hear the rest.

The shop was almost empty. Northerners in small taiga settlements don't spend much time in their department stores. They know when something scarce is expected. What's the point in going, if you know what's on the counter. Sometimes a team of geological workers from some remote base drops in or a hunter to buy some finer cloth for foot bindings. But apart from that what did people buy there? Pots and pans, pins and needles...

The shop assistant was knitting and did not show the slightest interest in the customer.

Loktiev walked slowly along the counter, taking a good look. There were men's suits and coats hanging up, shirts and underwear in the glass-topped showcases, and radios,

television sets, sportsware and electrical goods gathering dust on the counter. The children items were not specially displayed, but Loktiev found brushed wool costumes and little rubber boots with rabbits on them. There was no sign of nappies, matinée jackets and the brightly coloured quilted blankets that babies are wrapped in, or even of flannelette blankets. Sergei went round a second time, muttering to himself without being aware of it:

"Hmm!"

"Wotcher mean 'hmm' all the time?" the shop assistant could not contain herself. "Say wotcher want."

"Got any clothes?"

"Clothes? The place is full of them."

"Baby clothes."

"Why didn't you say so? Clothes, 'e says." The shop girl smiled broadly and threw her knitting down on the counter. "I keeps wonderin', what's 'e wanderin' about 'ere for, snoopin' around. Is 'e goin' ter climb down the chimney tonight, eh? There's plenty to take." She pointed round the shop. "Worth thousands. And 'e don't even know wot it's called, wot 'e wants."

"Well what is it called?" Loktiev asked hopefully.

The shop girl thought for a moment.

"Well, a layette, I suppose. But we call it a baby set. That's wot it says on the invoice."

"Have you got one or not?"

"That's the trouble. We 'aven't. They ain't delivered any for a long time."

"Don't people have babies here, then?"

"'Course they do, wot d'you think? Is it for a boy or a girl?"

Loktiev shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, so you don't know yet. Well, then." The shop girl gave a sympathetic sigh. "Wait here, I won't be a minute." She put a wadded jacket with a label over her uniform and, with a briskness surprising for her proportions, nipped out from behind the counter and slammed the door. Only to return at once, with a warning.

"Mind no embers fall out of the stove. The door sometimes falls open."

The goods "worth thousands" were abandoned to anyone who happened to drop in.

About ten minutes later she came back very pleased with herself.

"Got it. I had a job persuadin' her. This woman was sent two sets, just in case, one for a boy and one for a girl. She had a boy. So this was left over. She'd already promised it to someone, but I told'er that you was a stranger in these parts. You're not local, are you? No one says no to me. How could they?" The shop girl gestured meaningfully in the direction of the goods. "You're in luck, love. If it's a girl, it's just right. If it's a boy, it'll do. Boil it once or twice and you won't know what colour it was."

The bundle was tied up very grandly. The shop girl did not stint the string. Loktiev went along the street with the rattles clattering. The shop girl had sold him enough for a whole kindergarten. So Loktiev walked along with this musical accompaniment, but he was in a rotten mood. He was not giving this present with a clear conscience. He was buying his way out. Fortunately Larissa was out again, and there was a note saying: "Gone to the hospital, back about five (if you haven't gone by then). If I don't see you, I'll expect you on the way back. Love, Larissa."

How he wanted just to leave the parcel and not burn with shame when she would thank him delightedly. He even got up and went to the door, but without knowing why he came back and began to look for the place to hide the parcel. Larissa had no hiding places. There was a trunk in the corner and a big sports bag in the wardrobe, but the wardrobe itself was half-empty. He could have hidden in it himself. But as soon as she went to change her clothes she would open it and see the parcel. He couldn't put it in the divan either, it was too big. And of course he couldn't leave it with the neighbours. Eventually he managed to cover it up in a corner with newspapers, behind the chair with the pile of washing.

He no longer felt like going to the shop for some champagne. He sat down at the table and began mechanically to look through the exercise books with essays by Larissa's elderly pupils. "Happiness is being understood by others," he read. "For if they don't understand you, you have to lie or live in proud isolation, "wrote a certain Vilora Kazakova. "Bet she's in her late thirties," thought Loktiev maliciously. "Wonder what her job is." "There is no

happiness. Only unhappiness. I think it should be man's task to eliminate the latter, as well as shortcomings. Take my life, for instance." Next came a *curriculum vitae* such as one provides when applying for a job. There seemed to be little unhappiness in Ivan Lipkin's life history. Only frequent changes of address and job. "He's a drunkard," Loktiev decided and stopped reading. He was beginning to feel hungry. He usually stocked up with food for the whole run, there and back, so he decided to get his bag from the lorry. He mustn't eat Larissa out of house and home. But before he had time, Larissa returned panting hard.

"I was sure you'd have gone, but I hurried all the same. And here you are. It's a good thing, 'cos we haven't had a chance to talk yet."

"Yes, we must have a talk," said Loktiev, feeling both determined and hesitant at the same time.

"See what's happened to me," said Larissa.

"What's that?"

"I'm on maternity leave already."

"Yes, I can see."

"What have you been doing?"

"Just the usual. This is our first winter run."

"I'm getting married," said Larissa.

"What for?" asked Sergei, and it sounded very silly, even somehow pathetic.

"Am I silly?" Larissa said.

"Why?" Sergei asked. But this referred not to her being silly, but to her getting married.

"I don't know," said Larissa, and Sergei became all confused. What didn't she know? Why she was getting married?

"Isn't it my child then?" asked Sergei, not because he wanted to clarify the situation, but to establish that Larissa was guilty of something.

"Of course it is," she said simply. "You didn't ask me, but he did. I wanted a child so much, Sergei. Forgive me."

"When did you get hold of him, your fiancé?" Loktiev wanted to upset Larissa. To make her cry.

"Oleg? We were in the same class at school."

"Does he live here now? And wear my track suit? Perhaps you're hiding him at the neighbours' while I'm here?"

"Don't, Sergei. Don't be angry. If you want..."

"I don't want anything." Loktiev began. Panting and mixing up his words, Loktiev began to tell her that he had missed her a lot and thought about her and wanted to see her. That he had struggled through a marsh to her... It was almost all lies, but it seemed like the truth to him when he was saying it. He had even decided not to go and see his mother, although he should have, all because of her. Loktiev jumped up, took his mother's first letter, worn and crumpled, out of his wallet with shaking hands and opened it in front of Larissa.

"Read that."

Larissa read. For some reason her hair would not stay pinned up and kept falling over her face, making her—already not looking her best in pregnancy—appear most unattractive.

Loktiev felt a malicious delight. It did not occur to him that he was a bastard. On the contrary, he saw himself as the honest person and her as ... her... She now represented for him all that was bad about women. What would she say to him? What could she say to him?

"You're a traitor, Loktiev," said Larissa quietly and unaggressively, in pity and bitter surprise. She had only realised it now, this very moment, and it made her feel so sad, so desperate, that she couldn't help telling him. Although it was so difficult to do so, that she could not look at him.

...Only a long time afterwards did Loktiev realise that Larissa was not referring to their relationship. She probably wasn't thinking about it at all. The heightened instinct of a pregnant woman, a mother-to-be whose hopes were bound up with the new life inside her, helped her to understand that other mother, to sense her pain, the final misfortune which that distant, unknown woman, Sergei's mother, sensed ahead of her.

Sergei understood nothing of this, but he felt the truth of Larissa's words, as sharp and stinging as a slap in the face. And he spoke with the calmness of a doomed man.

"You're cleverer than I thought," he said. "Your books have taught you something. Alright, you'd better know the truth. I came here to tell you I wasn't going to marry you, and I'm still not going to. We stink of petrol all our lives. A woman wouldn't be happy with that. Happiness is when people understand you, or something like that..."

He pulled his jacket off the hook, put it on and buttoned it up to the neck. He could go now. "I'll send you money every month. That's all, I think. All the best to you and Oleg."

"I'm sorry, Sergei."

Loktiev slammed the door.

He drove off into the night without picking up the load of cigarettes. At the edge of the village he saw the figure of a person who obviously wanted a lift. Loktiev didn't usually pick up hitch-hikers. Where could you hitch to? It was a whole night's drive to Kuzmich, the petrol station and resting place, and there were no settlements on the way. True, about three hundred kilometres there was Stationary Base, but that was two kilometres from the road, and as far as he could remember no one went there by road, only by air.

It was either a drunk or a hunter from some remote winter camp. Probably tipsy too, if he was wandering around like that at night. But Loktiev slowed down. It would be terrible to be alone all night with his thoughts. He wanted to confide in someone. "I'll take him if he's not too pissed." Loktiev opened the door slightly.

An old man in a sheepskin coat and felt boots climbed in. His face was covered with an incredible network of fine wrinkles. It seemed to have no nose or eyes, only wrinkles, as if some nasty person had stamped on it with a rubber boot and stood there until the whole pattern was firmly imprinted.

"Like the look of me?" enquired the old man, settling down.

Loktiev said nothing. He was wondering whether to throw the old fellow out before he slammed the door. He stank of vodka.

"Everyone likes the look of me," said the old man benevolently and slammed the door.

"How did you manage to tank up, grandad, when drinking's prohibited here?"

"Just brought a bottle with me from the mainland and drank it with my mate. That's what made me a bit late. When the convoy passed, me and my mate was just beginning to warm up. His window looked out on the street. He told me to hurry or I'd be late. But how could I leave

a bottle like that? I was sure someone in the convoy would have an accident or got behind. And I was right, wasn't I? But it was bitter cold waiting. Had to run up and down."

"Where are you making for?"

"Stationary Base. Where else is there to go? I flew out from Irkutsk without a ticket, with a load of mandarines." The old man giggled. "But now I want to get home. It's not hard to hitch a lift now that the road has frozen up and there are plenty of lorries on the winter runs. Didn't want to ask the boss to put me on a plane. My mate said your convoy was the first."

"Yes, it is."

"So I guessed right."

"But what if you'd been wrong and I hadn't stayed behind?"

"I'd have waited for someone else. I got plenty of time. My leave is for six months. Only spent about a month on the mainland."

"Why was that?"

"Got fed up."

"Any relatives there?" asked Loktiev.

"I should say so. Went to see the old woman."

"And you got fed up with her so quickly, did you?"

"Couldn't find her. I went to the address where I used to send her money, and they told me she didn't live there any more. She'd gone away without leaving an address. 'Was she alone?' I asked. 'No,' they said. I didn't ask them who she'd gone with. Didn't need to. She's never had any kids. Well, thank goodness for that, I thought. She's not in hospital and not alone. So everything's alright."

"Send her money for long?"

"Three or four years. Can't remember exactly."

"Did she write to you?"

"No. She could only read and sign her name. When she wanted to send me her address, she cut the letters out of the newspaper and put them together. She was ashamed of not being educated, silly woman. She wasn't that old."

"Who addressed the envelope for her then?" asked Loktiev doubtfully.

"She used to ask someone in the post office. Pretended to be blind, I think. I don't know. She was a bit thick. All she could cook was dried cabbage soup, and that

wasn't very tasty. As the geologists were ladling it into the bowls they used to shout: 'Aunty Fro's boiled up the floor rags again!' They got angry with her when they came back starving. Dried cabbage tastes like nothing on earth when it's boiled. But what could she do? She had to account for all the cabbage. If she didn't cook, the mice would eat it, then she'd be in trouble. She had a lot of trouble, poor woman. She should have let them have it but all she did was cry."

"She sounds okay."

"Yes. We didn't live badly. For two years or so. Then she began to get dizzy spells and nosebleeds in the mornings. Couldn't take the climate. I told her she'd better scarper if she didn't want to kick the bucket."

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"What for? I like this climate."

"So you sent her money all the time, did you?"

"That's right. Then about three months ago the money orders started coming back. Thought it was time to go and take a reccy. See what had happened. But it turned out that she was alright. Needn't have bothered."

"I see," said Loktiev maliciously. "She threw you over, and now you're pretending to be an idiot."

"What do you mean 'threw me over'? I'm not a wet rag, am I," said the old man huffily. "We lived together for two years or whatever and it wasn't too bad. I built a log cabin then, too. Before that I used to freeze in a tent all winter. If it hadn't been for the climate, she'd have stayed. But I'll be here until they lay me out."

"Were you in labour camp?"

"Why, is it written on my face?" the old man laughed. "Yes, I was. A long time ago though."

"So you're crooked, grandad, eh?" Loktiev shot the old man an ironic glance. "Been through fire and water.... Done everything."

"No, I ain't done nothing, lad. I'd like to start all over again."

"Was it robbery or aiding and abetting?"

"I've never robbed anyone, lad, and I've only stolen once. Broke the lock on a collective farm barn. Listen," the old man suddenly said. "What's your name?"

"Sergei."

"Mine's Georgy. Yegor, or Gosha, if you like. They used

to call me Georgie there," the old man smiled. "Now it's 'old man'. Ever since I stopped shaving my beard, I've become 'old man'."

Loktiev glanced at the old man. He did have a very thin beard, that for some reason made his face look more bare. Sergei had not noticed it at first.

"How far have we come, Sergei?"

"There's still a long way to go."

For a while they said nothing. Loktiev smoked. The old man almost dropped off once or twice. If there was one thing Loktiev disliked, it was a passenger dozing next to him.

"So they put you inside, eh? What happened after that?" he asked loudly in irritation.

"After that," the old man's voice was clear as if he had not been dozing. "What do you expect? I got the life I had chosen. Mother died. My sisters went off somewhere. I wrote to the village council office. They'd gone without leaving an address. I didn't try to find them through the national inquiry network. They'd probably changed their name by then anyway. And they didn't try to find me either. Perhaps their husbands didn't want them to look for their thieving brother or perhaps they're too well-off now. Let's hope they get on well with each other at least..."

"Ever go back to your village?"

"Not once. What's more I even forgot the name of it. Stepanovka, or was it Semyonovka? I can see every path, every bush, as clear as anything even now, but can't for the life of me remember its name."

"So when you got out, you lived in the forest all the time?"

"No, why? When I was younger I used to spend my leave in Yakutsk. I blued all the money I had earned by digging and timber felling at the Restaurant North. One evening I gave two hundred to the band. I took a liking to a tune called 'The sailor boy went off on leave'. Know it? So I gave them the dough and they went on and on playing it. Then a big fellow with a beard came over. Very big with bright ginger hair. Seemed a nice chap. 'Stop the music, there's a good lad,' he says. 'I don't mind it, but the ladies want me to chuck you out in the snow.' I signed to the band to pack it in. But the boys

are honest lads. 'You've paid us,' they said, 'and we've got to play it another five times.' Then the commissionaire came up and asked what was the matter. I was on good terms with him by then. He scratched his head for a moment. 'Perhaps we could ask that lad to chuck the ladies out in the snow?' I wouldn't have that, of course. 'Then let's move your table into my office,' he said. He had a little storeroom two by two. So that's what we did. We carried the table and everything on it there. And would you believe it? The band came too. And we all fitted in. I had my meal and they played. The ginger-headed fellow came too. He dumped his ladies on someone else and came to join us. And we found room for him as well.

"So we raised our glasses and broke into 'The medals shone upon his breast' and the band struck up too. It was real matey. The ginger-headed bloke left a hundred as well. But then I got fed up with it and didn't go anywhere for about ten years, until now. Why go away when I like it here? The boss comes up and says: 'Time you applied for leave.' So I write out my application and he sends me off on an expedition. And that's that. I'm the baker at Stationary Base now. Bake the bread. They like it. But the flour's good, first class." The old man smiled happily.

"Is he really happy or just pretending," thought Loktiev. "He's cast his life to the winds and he seems happy... Although..."

He listened carefully to the old man and sympathised with him, but in the way you listen to a good adventure story. Everything that had happened to the old man was burnt out and cold, but his, Loktiev's, heart was flaming with living fire. And everything that had happened to him seemed to be more important and to need more understanding and concern than the old man's tales.

"You must hear all sorts of stories from the people you pick up," the old man grinned, as if to apologize for rambling on so long and indicate his readiness to listen to Loktiev if he felt like talking.

"You're the first person I've taken," Loktiev snapped, staring hard at the road, then glancing at the speedometer. "It's twenty kilometres to Stationary Base now. We've just passed the Yakutsk depot."

"There's always a flag at the turning," the old man reminded him.

"I know."

"That didn't take long," said the old man, as if to thank the driver.

"Long enough for a life story," said Loktiev. "In fifteen minutes one person will turn down a side road, while another goes racing ahead."

"You can never learn everything about another person's life or give it rhyme or reason." The old man was trying to guess what Loktiev was driving at.

"Who the devil needs other people's lives, when you can't even sort out your own," said Loktiev bitterly, and without realising it or wanting to, he began to talk about his mother and Larissa. About how he had wanted to organise his life according to a plan, so that everything was clear and meaningful, and now this woman had gone and spoilt everything. He had trusted her and not had anyone else, but now she'd announced that she was getting married. How could he ever trust anyone again? Loktiev hated himself for every word and this made him lie even more brazenly and despicably, talking about things in his relationship with Larissa that had never happened and even if they had he would never have mentioned them even on the rack. He himself would not tolerate such talk from a stranger.

"She's a bitch," he said at last. "They're all bitches. Aren't they, grandad? Eh?"

"No," said the old man, after a moment. "Perhaps you've never met any real bitches. I thought I knew one, but now I'm not sure she was... When I was let out, the first thing I wanted was a woman, of course. It'd been a long time. Me and my mate found work straightaway and we were waiting in the expedition hut to be sent to a site. Where to? The forest. So my mate says to me: you wait here and I'll go and dig up a couple of floozies. And he did, only not a couple, but one, and she looked as if she'd been dug up. Real horror she was and no chicken, either. Never mind, we had the money, so we had a ball. My mate overestimated and fell asleep, just after he'd got her nicely warmed up. She was already calling him her little teddy bear. I told her that we'd have to postpone the rest of the proceedings until another day. But she wouldn't

have it. 'What about you taking over,' she said. Suddenly I felt so rotten, I almost vomited at the table. I ran out of the hut and spent the night somewhere else. You old bitch, I thought. And thought so for a long time. But not any more. Who's to know what she'd been through..."

"You're wrong, grandad. And you're laying it on. Playing the goody-goody in your old age. If we dug down a bit further in you, perhaps we'd find something more than breaking into a barn, eh?"

"Perhaps," the old man agreed, and fell silent.

The longer he remained silent, the more uncomfortable Loktiev felt beside him, and the more he despised himself. At least the old man did not lie or try to justify himself. Just a brief "perhaps" and judge for yourself. But Loktiev said to him insultingly:

"You're trying to paint yourself as a saintly crook."

The old man laughed unexpectedly.

"No, lad. I've never hankered after being a saint, but I've always tried to be a decent person. I was lying when I said that I'd just gone off to visit my old girl. I wanted to make a new start. But it didn't work out. Never mind. It's not my first try and not my last. Look what I've got here," the old man opened his sheepskin coat. A black puppy was fast asleep on his lap. "Found him at the station, eating a greasy bit of pie wrapping by a litter bin. So I took him with me."

"Instead of your old girl."

"Yes. Can't go home empty-handed."

"He's been asleep for a long time. Alright, is he?"

"Yes. My mate and I gave him a spoonful of wine before we left." The pup stretched his hind legs lazily to show he was still alive. "He's beginning life, and I'm making a new start. But you're younger than me, lad. If she doesn't love you anymore, you'll get over it and find someone else."

"Love's a load of nonsense," Loktiev braked suddenly. "Out you get, grandad. There's your flag. You and the dog have made it stuffy in here. My head's aching."

The old man walked off the road and set off in short

steps slowly across the snow. He looked round several times and waved to the receding lorry. But Loktiev did not see him. His eyes were on the road ahead.

## 2

The old man walked to Stationary Base over the snow and had no thoughts of making a new start. He had picked up the pup at the station because he was drunk and wanted to surprise everybody. He imagined how the stableman's wife would throw up her hands: "Fancy doing a thing like that. Carting a mongrel thousands of miles, when we haven't got enough room to move."

Then what? Well, first he would feed the pup canned meat, then scraps. And when the pup grew up it could decide whether to go off with the stray dogs, hunting mice, fighting over bitches and sleeping in the snow, or whether to eat the old man's scraps. So there.

But he couldn't say this to the lorry driver, because he had obviously been upset and the old man had wanted to reassure and comfort him. This had somehow got connected with the puppy and the new start which people say it is never too late to make.

The nearer the old man came to his log cabin, the more he doubted this. His cabin was on the edge of the settlement. Opposite it, on the other side of the small forest river without a name, were the stables and two storehouses. They were all built of warped larch not meant for building (the building variety did not grow at this latitude) and the roofs were made of planks from the mainland. His cabin was also made of warped logs, and he'd had a lot of trouble with the cracks, which could not be filled with moss in spite of the deep grooves. When the really cold weather started, the old man filled them up with wet snow, but the walls still let in a lot of draughts, even though they were papered with several layers of old magazines. His salvation was the stove, an iron half-barrel with a long pipe that went through the roof and protruded about two metres above the cabin, like a factory chimney. The draught was so strong that, if it weren't for the spark guard, an old perforated can, it would have sucked the logs out of the stove. Thanks to this draught

you could make the cabin so hot in a few minutes that you could hardly bear it. True, it got cold again even more quickly. But the old man was used to these sharp changes in temperature. Pity the old girl hadn't been able to get used to them.

His plank bed was positioned in such a way that when the cold woke him up at night he could stick a hand into the sleeve of his sheepskin, which he used to throw on the flap of his sleeping bag, shove a new portion of firewood prepared beforehand into the stove, splash on some petrol and throw in a lighted match, all without getting up. After this operation he could sleep happily for another hour and a half. Then he had to repeat it all over again. The old man was so used to his interrupted sleep that it did not worry him in the slightest and by morning he had forgotten how many times he had stoked up the fire. He seemed to do it unconsciously, in his sleep.

Apart from the bed, the old man had little furniture. A table made of crates, three wooden blocks for stools, a bench with enamelled bowls for dough, and a besom. All home-made. He used to joke that there wasn't much of it, but it was all his own work, and say that there would be not much squabbling over his belongings when he died.

So he walked along in the snow, laughing at himself and his home, mentally telling it all to the pup who was still asleep in his jacket. At the edge of the settlement he was met by the local dogs, with their frost-covered, shaggy heads, their pointed ears inherited from Eskimo dogs, and their limp, drooping mongrel tails. None of them barked, but none of them wagged their tails either. They simply accompanied the old man to his log cabin and lay down there in the snow. The places where they had been lying before were cold by now. The old man did not talk to them. He scarped the snow away from the entrance with his boot and kicked open the door, trying to remember whether he had brought any firewood in before he went away.

"We'll make a new start by lighting the stove," he muttered. He went inside, groping his way carefully, although he knew there was nothing to fall over except the stove, and that was in the opposite corner. He found a candle, lit it, let a few drops of paraffin fall onto the

table, and stuck it on top. From the walls the pictures of champion coal miners, fishermen, harvesters and famous cosmonauts stared down at him.

"Hello, lads," the old man bawled. He had turned the pictures of women to the wall, afraid they would laugh at him. The lads said nothing.

"Get fed up here without me?" he continued, putting more firewood into the stove. He had not forgotten to get in a store of firewood before he left, thinking that someone might need to spend the night there in his absence.

He thrust the puppy straightaway into his cold sleeping bag. After the slamming of station doors and indifferent hurrying feet the pup had appreciated the warmth and affection and now assumed with horror that the cold sleeping bag meant yet another blow of fate. He wriggled down to the bottom where there was a stronger scent of the old man. But it was just as cold and dark down there. The pup whined miserably.

"Don't give up when things get difficult, soppy." The old man found him through the bag, pressing him lightly with his hand. "People don't whine when they have to sleep in sleeping bags, do they?" The pup calmed down at the sound of his voice and the touch of his hand. "I'll just get the stove going, then let you out."

The stove was already roaring. A patch of orange appeared by the pipe and grew slowly larger.

"You still know how," the old man said approvingly to the stove. In the light of the guttering candle he examined the room more carefully. No one had looked in while he had been away. The ice in the kettle had pushed the lid up slightly. Just before he left the old man had put on the kettle and started to open a tin of meat, but there hadn't been time. The tin opener was still sticking out of the tin. At that moment he had heard the helicopter. At first he had thought it was the kettle boiling. He put down the tin, went to the stove and lifted up the lid, but the water was not even bubbling. Then the old man realised that it was the helicopter and began to panic. He carried the kettle over to the table, burning his fingers, then grabbed his sheepskin coat and fur cap, and realised he was ready. But since he calculated that the helicopter was still only crossing the ridge, he decided to take a look at the sheepskin. The buttons were all there. That was the main thing.

But the back had criss-crosses of rust on it from lying for a long time under a mattress.

Last year the radio operator had come round carrying the sheepskin folded inside out. "Let's do a swop, grandad?" The old man fingered the fur which was thick and long like Romanov lamb. The old man's sheepskin wasn't bad either, but the fur wasn't so thick. Yet he couldn't believe that someone like the radio operator, a very sly lad, would want to exchange anything worth having.

"Is it moulting?" he asked him directly.

The radio operator realised why the old man was hesitating.

"Throw in two jars of raspberry jam, will you?"

This convinced the old man. Jam was hard to get, and it was quite possible the lad had been here so long that he had suddenly wanted some. "Can't stand the sight of condensed milk, tinned meat, or stewed plums, not even bottled cucumbers. I'll die if I don't have some raspberry jam this minute." It was a feeling people sometimes got. The old man knew.

"It's a deal," he said, getting the jars of raspberry jam which he could not stand, incidentally, out from under his bed, and handing his sheepskin to the radio operator.

"Make it three. I'm not cheating you," said the operator.

The old man rolled out the third and last jar.

With a single movement the radio operator unfolded the sheepskin, like a juggler, and it became clear why he was in such a hurry to exchange it.

"It's a good coat, never been worn," he reassured the old man. "And check patterns are all the fashion these days. A check sheepskin sounds fine, doesn't it?"

The sheepskin was light and very warm, and served the old man well. Whenever he met the radio operator they would both burst out laughing, remembering how briskly the old man had rolled the last bottle of jam out from under the bed, afraid that the other man would change his mind at the last moment.

As he was about to leave, however, the old man thought he might look a bit too fashionable in a coat like that on the mainland, but it was too late to do anything about it. The helicopter was roaring quite close. The old man hurried off to the piece of ground that had been cleared of tree stumps to serve as a landing stage.

It was about three hundred metres away. He was the last to arrive. Almost the whole team was there. Some had come to collect supplies, others just to watch. A helicopter was quite an event. There was no mail this time. The radio operator was there, chatting with the pilots, asking them about his colleagues and calling them all "Marconi" according to the old naval tradition.

The old man was waiting for them to finish unloading and felt a bit embarrassed to be the only passenger for this enormous helicopter. There wasn't even any freight to be transported from the settlement.

At that moment the pilots must have asked if there were any passengers, because the radio operator replied that there was one and began to look around for the old man. When he saw him, the radio operator's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He broke off what he was saying and spluttered.

"Hey, grandad," he shouted, raising his arm. "Do you want to shame our republic before the whole federation? Take that sheepskin off." The radio operator looked down at himself, but he was wearing only a sweater and jacket. The others had not gone over to their winter kit either. Without another word, the radio operator sped off to the settlement. But it was too late. The pilots started the engine and the old man was swept up into the air, waving through the window to the radio operator who continued to run for a while, winding in and out of the larch trees. "Heave to," the old man called mentally to the radio operator, repeating his favourite expression. The operator stopped at once, as if he had heard, and shook his fist at the departing old man.

The old man was also seen off by the smoke from his own chimney. He had forgotten to do the most important thing—put out the fire in the stove. "Never mind, it'll burn itself out. It's not coal," he reassured himself, but turned away superstitiously and did not look at the settlement or his log cabin again....

But nothing had happened. Everything was alright. He didn't even need to go outside for some snow. He could just put on the kettle and make some strong Northern tea. It was getting warm in the cabin.

"That's more like it." The old man threw off his sheepskin and went to the table. "Now there's the animal to

feed." He finished opening the can of meat and stood it on the red-hot stove, which produced a cloud of smoke and a smell of burnt grease. The old man was not in the habit of wiping grease off cans.

"You'll be needing a dish, won't you, boy?" The old man found his bowl, wiped the inside round with his finger, tested whether the can of meat was too hot, also with his finger, and shook half of it into the bowl. "Nothing's too good for a man's best friend," he said. He pulled the pup out of the sleeping bag clumsily, by its hind leg, ant stuck its nose into the bowl. "Welcome to the Far North."

The pup did not need to be told twice. It began to eat steadily, growling now and then at all possible enemies, and glancing at the old man to see if he approved of such behaviour.

The old man did approve, and kept saying:

"Give it to them, boy. Send them running."

After finishing the meat and licking the bowl clean, the pup rolled onto its back and curled its paws in an expression of gratitude to its master.

"None of that," said the old man. "We don't do that here." He lifted the pup roughly and painfully by the scruff of its neck and dropped it on its feet. The pup did not whine. It only shook itself, ran round the room, sniffing all the corners, dragged over the trouser-leg of a pair of old quilted dungarees (the old man had used the other trouser-leg to stop up the pipe in his bake-house), arranged a spot for himself at a safe distance from the stove, carried his bowl over in his teeth and lay down, looking enquiringly at the old man.

"That's more like it, boy," said the old man. "No more playing the fool."

He rolled a block up to the cabin's one and only window, sat down on it and rubbed the moisture-covered window with his sleeve. He paid no more attention to the dog. It was growing light outside. You could already distinguish the as yet indistinct outlines of the settlement houses. There were five of them, not counting the old man's cabin. At the opposite end of the settlement was the house of the base chief. Like the old man's cabin it was not quite in line with the rest. They used to joke in the

settlement that there were two chiefs in the base, one on the right and one on the left, both out of line.

Earlier, when the base was being set up, there had been no houses here. They had appeared the year his old girl left. Before that everyone had lived in tents all the year round. The old man had been the first to build himself a log cabin and, of course, he had set it up where he liked. When they delivered the pre-fabricated houses (which were called Finnish for some reason, although each beam was clearly stamped "Omsk Woodworking Combine") and began to assemble them, they naturally decided the houses would look nicer in a straight row, but the chief had resisted. "Mine must go on the spot where my old tent stood." So that was how he and the old man came to be out of line.

The Finnish houses were painted different colours and very gay. Against the monotonous Arctic landscape of sparse forest they created a false impression of easy life in the countryside and of the Golden Age in general. But apart from being pretty, they also represented the respectability of a settled life, although the inhabitants of the settlement changed every six months.

This appearance of a settled life must have made a strong impression of the high-ups, because they had been intending to disband the base for ten years now, but it was still there.

The old man was the only private householder in the settlement, and this gave him certain privileges. Firstly, he never had to take anyone in even in summer when the base had visitors, students doing practicals and seasonal workers, who were put up in the state houses. Secondly, the base chief had never dared to nail up on the old man's cabin any notices criticising him or asking him to do something, as he was wont to do. For example, one morning the radio operator had come out of his house to discover a notice nailed over the door that said, "Your work stinks, Lev!" After scratching his neck for a bit, the radio operator went to see the chief and asked how long the notice was to stay there.

"A week," was the harsh reply.

For a whole week the inhabitants of the settlement shook their heads sympathetically at Lev's negligence and laughed at him behind his back.

Any day the management's wrath was likely to descend on the house of the stable-man and his wife.

"The state of the public W.C. does you no credit, Comrades N and K!!!" read a placard which for ethical reasons refrained from revealing the full names of the perpetrators of such a terrible crime.

The stable-man's wife immediately rushed off to the chief, of course, while her husband set about putting things right, namely, cleaning the W.C.

"How could you! At my age! The disgrace of it! And it's so unfair! You just come and take a look. How could you..."

The chief took her at her word and had the placard removed.

There were also general exhortations like "Let's all get rid of the mice!"

All this did not concern the old man. In his own cabin he was safe from the wrath of the management. At least from wrath in such an obvious form. True, people did sometimes try to interfere with him, particularly the seasonal lot, who didn't know the form and traditions of Stationary Base.

"Write a complaint to the baker," these big-mouths would shout. "Tell him the bread's only half baked the second day running. It sticks to your teeth."

"Wait one more day," the chief would answer politely. "Then you'll get first-class bread. I don't have the right to complain to him. He's on sovereign territory. But I could write a letter of complaint to you, about putting lotion to the wrong use."

Once every six months the old man would brew some home-made beer, and for three days the bread he baked was no good, although he did exactly the same as on all the other days. He let the dough stand and heated the oven, a barrel in the ground with an opening at one end and welded rods for the tins, and tested the temperature by dropping his beard over the pipe after he had raked out the coals (if his beard crackled and there was a smell of burning hair, it was alright to put the bread in), and walked over to the stable and back, exchanging the same pleasantries with the stable-man, all as usual.

"How's Dolly? Still going strong?"

"Why shouldn't she be? She don't overwork herself. Does nothing but put on weight."

In those three fatal days another short sentence was added.

"You're fair pickled today," the stable-man would say enviously.

The old man winked, and that also took time. Then he would go to take out the bread. Before opening the oven he always muttered:

"Today everything'll be okay and no mistake."

He knocked the tins onto a wooden grid. As usual the loaves were brown and smelt delicious. The old man sat down on a log and waited resignedly for the stable-man to come for the batch. He dared not break a loaf himself. The stable-man put the loaves on a wooden tray, and when there was only one left, picked it up by the ends coolly and, with his usual "Good luck, lad" broke it across his knee and immediately put the two halves together again.

The stable-man slowly took the halves apart again. At first there was a cloud of strong-smelling doughy steam, but when this had dispersed it became obvious that the halves were still joined in the middle by a sticky, viscous mass of under-baked dough.

"A bomb," barked the stable-man happily and threw the halves into the tray.

Tears welled in the old man's eyes, although he was not given to crying. It was one of nature's unfathomable mysteries. As soon as the brewing stopped, the bread began to turn out well again. The stable-man would break one more test roll in half and mutter disappointedly:

"A colonel."

Generally speaking there was remarkably little drinking in the settlement, in spite of the generally accepted view that people who lived in the North couldn't manage without a few extra degrees, that the climate was so harsh you couldn't do anything without a drink or two under your belt and topographers were even given an alcohol allowance for cleaning their sights.

The only time they drank was at the big public holidays: Labour Day, the anniversary of the October Revolution and New Year. Even the seasonal workers, who came to these Northern latitudes from more southern climes,

were amazed to see that you could live without "it", that a lack of "it" was not fatal.

It was thanks to the chief that this state of affairs prevailed at the base. His methods were simple to the point of genius. He ordered an annual allowance of two crates of vodka for the whole settlement, not a bottle more, and kept the box of dry yeast under his bed. The old man received it from his hands only. This solemn act was recorded in a special notebook that indicated the amount (half a mugful), and date. Both giver and receiver had to sign. The exercise book was kept in the safe next to the large-scale maps.

The chief chose to overlook the fact that by dint of pinching and scraping the old man managed to save enough yeast for a bucket of home-made hooch every six months, only because the unmistakable smell of fermenting wafted from his privately owned log cabin alone, and never from the Finnish houses. The chief had a most acute sense of smell. The old man was called the last of the kulaks because of his unnatural passion for drinking alone and out of envy. The chief was called the tyrant. But outside the settlement not a soul knew these nicknames.

The old man knew everything about his chief, Boris Sergeyevich Ognevoy. Some of it had been told to him by the chief himself, but the juicy bits had been added by hearsay. The old man even knew things that Ognevoy disliked talking about, or rather, never mentioned. If he were asked whether he was married, he usually replied jokingly: "My fiancée isn't old enough yet."

But the old man knew for sure that Ognevoy had got married on his very first long leave, that his wife was a Muscovite, a microbiologist, and that the chief still took only his long leave, that is, visited his wife once every three years. He had two children, a boy and a girl. With three years between them, of course. How that sort of life could allow a geologist and a microbiologist to bring up a family was something on which the old man had never reflected, but he always felt sad when after the mail delivery the strains of operatic arias could be heard from the chief's house.

On these days the inhabitants of the settlement postponed even the most urgent business until the next day.

Some prospector would come to complain about the supplies officer who had cheated his team out of tinned beef and given them pork instead. He marched towards the chief's house with the confident step of a man sure he is in the right, cursing the supplies officer to high heaven and barely able to translate his anger into proper Russian, when he suddenly heard the chief singing. "Never mind," he would resign himself. Can't upset the old man now." And he would go back also humming something to himself.

It was almost light outside, but the settlement continued to sleep. There were no fresh tracks even from the stableman's house and his wife hadn't lit the stove yet. Dolly had long since been snuffling through the leftovers at the manger, cursing fate in her own tongue for the old age which hung heavy upon her, and the stable-man for his idleness and heartlessness. As a draught horse Dolly had been written off the books about three years ago and now there were no documents authorising an allowance of fodder, hay, harness, water or a sledge for her, but in spite of this Dolly was still alive, carting water from the river, the old man's bread, and freight from the helicopter landing stage and receiving, not according to any strict schedule, but every day nevertheless, some horse sustenance. And when the stable-man got angry with her, he used to say:

"Just you wait, Dolly. When the warm weather comes I'll put a stallion on you."

Apart from Dolly there wasn't a single stallion or mare for a good thousand kilometres. Dolly did not know that, but she must have sensed it, because she replied to the stable-man's threats by dropping a long, contemptuous thread of saliva to the very ground. It was pure chance that had brought her to the base. All her life she had been a pack horse, but in the season which was to have been her last, she was suddenly switched to the saddle. The head of the geophysical unit suddenly decided he would like his own personal means of transport. No deer could carry him. Dolly was packed into a helicopter and flown to the Arctic Circle. The geophysicist was a rotten rider. Within a week her back was a mass of sores from his whip, and in another week she could hardly walk. She was a true

Northerner, born and bred in Yakutia, but she could not live on reindeer moss. She stuck it out for a fortnight, by drawing on all her inner resources, but then she began to sink onto her knees every half-mile and turn her sad, intelligent eyes to the geophysicist as if imploring him to stop tormenting her or put a bullet through her head. There were those who favoured the latter course.

"Let's do the old nag in, chief. That'll mean food for three days, then you can write out a paper saying the old mare's got the ganders and that's that. The vet will sign it. You bet!"

"You'll get diarrhoea," the chief said and dragged Dolly by the reins over the last watershed almost carrying her on his shoulders.

They arrived at a big river and fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for Dolly, met a barge travelling empty downstream. And again for the inevitable bottle of alcohol the chief agreed with the skipper that he would take the horse to the base. They found a place for Dolly on deck, fed her with rusks and oat briquettes and let her drink from the fire bucket. After five days the barge ran aground. Dolly was led ashore and at first they all wanted to ride on her together, but were put off by the sight of her lacerated, suppurating back. They decided to abandon her, particularly as she was not entered in the skipper's books, and the accompanying note which the geophysicist had given the skipper had been crumpled up by the latter demonstratively before the whole crew.

While Dolly was on the barge being fed with oat briquettes she had grown a little stronger and the will to live had returned. Guided by her animal instinct she trotted fifty kilometres upstream, the same distance along a smaller river and arrived at Stationary Base, where she was granted an illegal food allowance. The chief of the geophysical unit returned from the field and decided to tell the truth about the horse, for which the accounts department, without further ado, making allowances for Dolly's advanced age, stung him for one thousand five hundred roubles. And he would have paid up meekly, if Ognevoy had not blurted out in his presence that there was a lost horse in his settlement. So the geophysicist was able to employ all his wiliness to prove that the mare by the name of Dolly had not disappeared, been eaten or

drowned, and certainly not been sold on the side, but was living and flourishing in Stationary Base..

During stock-taking the accounts department casually asked Ognevoy if he had a horse at Stationary Base. To which he replied unsuspectingly and even laughingly:

"Yes, so what?"

"Sign here," they said.

"Well, I'll be blowed," Ognevoy marvelled later. "Fancy falling for that so easily."

True, a year later Ognevoy presented headquarters with a torn deer sack that had been rubbed till it shone, pretending it was the hide of the deceased Dolly, and she was taken off the books. He did this for two reasons. Firstly, to show that he was not such a ninny as some people thought and, secondly, because the headquarters supply department had refused point blank to provide the horse with fodder. Since then for about three years Dolly had lived and worked not because she had the right to, but thanks to people's charity.

This explained why the stable-man could oversleep her morning feed and sometimes forget to give her hay in the evening, without any pangs of conscience. And if Dolly had the impertinence to bang her hooves impatiently in his presence, he would shout threateningly:

"Steady on! I'll put a stag on you, and you'll have a horned foal."

Dolly endured the insults patiently, convinced that she was alive thanks to the efforts of this coarse, clumsy man, who appeared never to have worked with horses before her.

In fact both the stable-man and his wife knew they owed their wages, their zonal coefficient, their northern increments and their title to Dolly. On the books the stable-man was down as an unskilled labourer and his wife as a cleaner. If Dolly were suddenly to give up the ghost, the two of them would have to leave the settlement, with sorrow in their hearts and the words "due to staff reductions" on their work cards, because for all his kindness and goodheartedness the base chief could not think up any other "unskilled" labour for the stable-man, and his wife must needs follow him as his faithful spouse.

As a man with a more assured position (the baker was one of the permanent posts on the books), the old man was

slightly contemptuous of the stable-man and his wife. He could, for example, express doubt as to their parental ambitions. Their younger son Yuri, or Yurik as he was affectionately called by them, was studying at an institute in Irkutsk. Yurik was a third-year student, but he had never done well enough to receive a grant. He never wrote to his parents, but occasionally sent them telegrams when his allowance of one hundred and twenty roubles a month did not see him through. His parents would get upset, because apart from sending him this money, they were also saving up for a three-roomed cooperative flat and the furniture to go with it. But all the same they hurried round to the radio operator to get him to send a radiogram: instead of transferring so-and-so's wages to the savings bank, send the money by telegraph to the following address...

"Never mind," the stable-man's wife would comfort him. "We'll stay here for an extra month and make it up."

They had been living in the North for many years, but they never allowed themselves to think in terms of staying for more than another month at the most.

The old man used to laugh at them.

"Where are you hurrying off to? Do you think your son will thank you if you buy him a flat? Not a bit of it. 'Off you go to the country, dear parents, and unlock your log cabin (they really did have a house in the country), plant a lot of potatoes so I can have some too, and settle down there. And me and the missus will send you the kids for the summer holidays.'"

The stable-man glowered. He did not understand jokes. His wife comforted him:

"Don't take any notice of him. It's only envy. He hasn't got anyone to send money to. He envies us..."

The old man actually did envy them, but he tried not to show it.

"If you go on at me like this, I'll tell Dolly all about your plans and that she was written off three years ago. If she finds that out, she'll drop dead on the spot. And what then?"

The stable-man glowered even more.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the contradictions in his relationship with the stable-man and his wife the old man was on the closest of terms with them. One might even say

they were friends and enemies at the same time. The main cause of the secret enmity was that the old man suspected the stable-man's wife of being after his job. If she succeeded in getting it, the fate of her and her husband would cease to depend on the life or death of the old mare. The stable-man could easily get promoted to a cleaner, and that would be that. The old man would have betted his life that in the fortnight he had been away the stable-man's wife had asked the chief several times whether the old man had given his notice or asked to have his work-book forwarded. They were probably dreaming of it now.

"Never mind, you'll soon wake up," he thought gleefully, "and then you'll get a surprise. The old man's back!"

Their friendship seemed to have no real basis, yet hardly a day passed without the stable-man or his wife dropping round to the old man's cabin. They rarely came together. Only when their precious Yurik got up to his latest piece of mischief which their simple heads found it hard to take in at once.

"Bought a stereo tape recorder," read the telegram. "Send four hundred urgently."

The stable-man's wife ran in, waving the radiogram, a page out of an ordinary exercise book on which for such occasions the radio operator drew a red rose and two kissing doves. The old man did not need to be read the telegram. He knew what it was about from the roses.

"He's milking us dry, the rascal," lamented the stable-man's wife, putting the corner of her kerchief to her dry eyes. "He'll be the ruin of us. What can we do?" She looked in turn at the old man and her husband.

"Do? Don't send him a penny," said the old man angrily, surprised that he was taking someone else's misfortune so closely to heart. It wasn't even misfortune, it was sheer stupidity. He wasn't sorry about their money, he never spared his own. He was sorry for these people, who, he was firmly convinced, were spoiling their son. "Ask the operator to draw a big sign and send it to your precious son in an envelope."

"Aye, aye," the stable-man nodded.

"What are you ayeing about?" his wife raised her arm threateningly to him. "The boy's paid the money, and all he can do is aye. What's Yurik supposed to do now. Go and steal it? We'll send him some for the last time."

"Aye, aye," her husband agreed.

The stable-man's wife snatched up the radiogram defiantly from the table and went to the door, deeply offended by the old man's advice. Her husband wandered after her, hunched up, his heavy arms hanging loosely before him, like an elderly orang-outang.

On all other occasions they came in singly. The stable-man was a man of remarkably few words, but did not seem to regard this as a shortcoming.

One day the old man asked him whether he had always talked so little or whether someone had made him lose his tongue.

"Why?" asked the stable-man in genuine surprise. "I speak when I'm spoken to and give as good as I get. What's the point in just talking?"

His wife, however, was such a gas-bag that it was difficult to imagine her mouth closed except when she was asleep in bed or in her coffin. The words rolled off her tongue so quickly that it was sometimes hard to catch the sense of what she was saying.

"Steady on there," the old man would stop her, "I didn't get that. Start again."

The woman was not put out and merely asked:

"Remind me what I was telling you about. Ah!" And she would go rattling on at even greater speed.

The couple used to have a rest from each other at the old man's place.

The old man's relations with the other inhabitants of the settlement were more tenuous. The radio operator preferred foreign jazz and reading books to any form of human contact. He rarely came to see the old man, only if it were absolutely necessary. The diggers and timber-fellers spent most of their time in the taiga and the young geologists, topographers and geophysicists were at the base only for the field season and had their own circle.

The old man himself hated the seasonal workers for their insolence and love of easy money, which the old man could not remember in all his time at the base. When they heard that they would be getting three hundred roubles a month or three hundred and fifty, instead of a thousand, they demanded to be sent back at once because the people who had tried to recruit them at the railway station had promised at least a thousand. After fuming and squabbling,

trying to intimidate the base chief and realising that he was impervious to this and that no transport would arrive to take them back until the end of the season, they began to work. They did a pretty good job, and when it was time to leave many of them asked to be taken on permanently. Sometimes the best were kept on and the others envied them.

Apart from friendship, acquaintances and enforced coexistence the old man had one strong attachment in the settlement. It was one-sided, and the old man kept it a secret. At least he thought so. Some eighteen months ago the chief had knocked on his door and called the old man outside. Standing beside him, craning her neck and staring up at the chief as if he were the cedar of Lebanon or some other marvel about which she had heard in school but never seen in real life, was a slip of a girl dressed in a home-knit sweater and trousers. She was ready to agree with everything the chief uttered from his almost celestial height.

"We have here," the chief said somewhat doubtfully, "a young economist, or young specialist, which is basically the same thing."

The girl confirmed the chief's utterances with a happy look. She was indeed an economist, and young ... and basically... And she didn't even know how it had happened, when she'd managed to do all that.

"I'm putting her next to you," the chief pointed at the house next to the old man's cabin. "Keep an eye on her for the time being just in case."

He rocked slightly on his long legs and, finding nothing more to say, went home.

"My name's Olga," the girl told the old man. "But you needn't keep an eye on me, I'm the cat that walked by itself." She ran quickly up to her porch and disappeared inside the house.

"You may be a cat, but you don't know the local toms," thought the old man. "We'll see how you keep them at bay. And if necessary perhaps we will give a hand."

The old man decided not to try and force his advice on her. Let her get on with it herself, since she had decided to come to these remote parts.

While it was warm the bookkeeper (as the old man christened her for the sake of clarity) felt as light as a bird.

And like a bird she sang songs which did not suit her youthful appearance and thin, almost childlike voice. "There's only shallows along this lap, love," she sang. "But still they won't make us lose heart. This place you'll not find on any map, love. We're charting new land from the start."

The old man used to smile. The girl was obviously playing at being the tough geologist. Although she was a bookkeeper, she did work in a geological party and must want to call herself a geologist.

*And if we never meet up again, love.*
*It still won't break my heart for long.*
*I'll love you only until the crossroads,*
*Then we'll each go our way alone.*

The old man could understand this as well. The girl must have had a boy friend at the college where she studied. Mustn't she? Or perhaps he was only a figment of her imagination. But at her age it was almost the same thing. And she was trying to prove that she had loved this dream "until the crossroads", but now she was an independent, grown-up woman, who had crossed her first hurdle by coming to the Arctic Circle against the advice of her teachers and the tears of her poor mother. Her boyfriend (or maiden's dream) had not been so stupid. He had found a job in the municipal supply department three bus stops away from his home.

The girl would sit on her porch until late at night, hunched into a ball, her chin between her knees. She could not get used to the idea that you still had to sleep although the night was as light as day.

The old man could not guess all the thoughts that were passing through her little head, of course, but a nice, light feeling warmed his heart and he wanted to sing or at least hear someone singing. Not about shallows, but something slow, sad and poignant. About a slender rowan tree, for example, or about a young maid gazing sorrowfully at the three horses bearing the young, handsome and fickle lieutenant away from her.

The old man never went to bed until the girl had gone into the house. Then he would get up from the stool by the window, go to his bed and snuggle down in the sleep-

ing bag. But he would twist and turn for a long time, hawking and coughing, and a wave of irritation at everything bad that he knew in himself and in others, but was sure the silly accountant did not share, came over him. He began to be disturbed by the smell of his own bed linen, which he had never noticed before.

Winter came early to the settlement. It began to snow in the middle of September, and by October the night temperature was down to about minus thirty.

The stable-man carted firewood to the houses. He dumped a pile of blocks in front of the bookkeeper's porch too. Each morning the girl came out of the house with an axe under her arm (which she carried like an office file) and the unequal combat with the blocks of larch wood began. In her hands the axe turned into a live thing that did as it pleased. It might fly out of her hands when she swung it, and she spent a long time hunting for it in the deep snow. It would refuse to land on the block, falling to the right or left of it. And when it felt like cutting into the wood, it stuck there so firmly that the girl could not pull it out however hard she tried. She would run into the house to cry unobserved. She usually returned with a heavy iron with which she banged the axe handle in wild desperation, not only freeing it but also punishing it for causing her so much trouble. Having punished and freed the axe, the bookkeeper would begin all over again. Once more it was not she who guided the axe, but the axe that led her in all directions as the fancy took it. From all corners of the settlement the local dogs would gather round and lie in a semi-circle, as if for a free entertainment, watching thoughtfully, not knowing whether to class this as a comedy or a tragedy.

Occasionally one of the dogs, without getting up, but only raising its head to the sky, would howl lazily once or twice, evidently trying to tell the girl something in its own language. The girl shuddered at the unexpected noise and threw a piece of wood at the dog who remained impassive.

By this time the old man had already lit the fire in his "bake-house" for the day's bread. While the logs were burning in the barrel he found time to fortify himself with a mug of strong tea. He did his best to keep out of the girl's sight. He would watch her, hiding behind a tree.

It was an amusing sight, but he felt sorry for her.

One day when the bookkeeper had gone to work the old man chopped up all the blocks, piled them neatly along the wall of her house and watched at his window for her to return.

Eventually she appeared. Some distance from her house she noticed the neatly piled logs and stood stock still in surprise. Then a whirlwind seemed to whisk her up and she began to dance, twirling round and doing intricate steps in her grey felt boots.

The old man's eyes filled with a strange, warm moistness, which he had thought was buried right at the very bottom of his organism and would need a good slug of alcohol to bring it to the surface. The old man closed his eyes. He suddenly thought that in all his life he had never once given a present to a child.

When he opened his eyes and looked out of the window again, the girl was still dancing. He realised that her joy and excitement were not meant for him. It was not he, a wrinkled, morose old man, who had chopped and piled up the wood, but a young and handsome knight.

And soon the knight appeared. He was bareheaded (the snow was shining on his wavy hair, with a white sheepskin thrown over his shoulders to reveal the deer leaping over the sweater on his chest, and high boots of ginger dog skin that he had hired from the radio operator. This elegant footwear was not very suitable for working in the forest. It got caught on branches, tore easily and did not dry overnight. It was not usually given to timber-fellers, but the knight was their foreman and his name was Alex Pesikov (Pesik meaning "doggy" in Russian). Everything about him was perfect, except for the letter in the middle of his surname. When he realised this, he learnt to swallow it very naturally and unobtrusively and introduced himself as Alex Peskov.

So this Alex Pesikov was proposing to storm the bookkeeper's house before the old man's eyes, not creeping up furtively, but planting his feet firmly and striding along confidently, unabashed to be wearing someone else's fur boots, fearing nothing and no man.

The old man decided that the girl needed his protection. He caught Pesikov just as he was about to go up the porch. The old man was carrying the hook he used to pull the

tins out of the oven. This was little protection against Pesikov, of course. It would have been hard to stop him with a bear-spear. But the lad was taken aback at the sight of the old man.

"Left turn, quick march," said the old man quietly, trying to hide his agitation.

"Been guzzling your moonshine today, grandad? Or taken poison?"

The old man used the hook to push back his cap from his eyes. The hook was sharp and Pesikov was wearing a new sheepskin and someone else's fur boots. The lad slowed down, wondering what he could say to reassure the old man, without coming to closer grips with him.

At that moment the bookkeeper appeared on the porch, and the old man noticed that, firstly, she had her outdoor clothes on and, secondly, she looked smarter than usual.

"You're interested in piece-work, are you? A piece-work contract?" she asked Pesikov, blushing. "Come with me to the office and we'll check all the points there."

The bookkeeper ran down the steps and set off quickly and lightly, without looking round.

"I'm interested in piece-work. See?" Pesikov said to the old man. "What did you think? And you, an old man!"

Alex walked in an impressive, leisurely fashion, planting each foot firmly on the ground and twisting his sock slightly. But he soon caught up the bookkeeper and they walked off together.

"You did defend her well and no mistake," the old man said to himself. He went into his cabin, but did not sit by the window as usual. It was evening, but he did not want to know when the bookkeeper returned. It was nothing to do with him. He went on chopping her wood and piling it up, but after a month or two this service became unnecessary too.

One morning, returning as usual from his "bake-house" and thinking that it was about time to replenish his neighbour's supply of chopped firewood, the old man saw Pesikov by the pile of blocks. Alex had obviously been working there for some time. He was wearing a faded check shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, and grey workman's felt boots with upturned toes. His shirt was steaming. The blocks were flying resonantly in all directions, and the dogs, lying closeby as usual, barely had time to jump

out of the way of the chips that were travelling as fast as bullets.

You could sense the excess of energy in Pesikov. He was obviously exerting himself for his own enjoyment.

"What's it to be, grandad? Peace everlasting?" Alex smiled good-naturedly at the old man. "Put your hook away. Olga and I have agreed on all the points. Get it?"

Conflicting emotions surged in the old man's breast. He was glad to see Olga walk past his window, her cheek resting against her husband's sheepskin, yet angry with Pesikov. The girl seemed so young. He could have waited a bit, the he-man. If Olga had been the old man's daughter, he would never have permitted it.

That year the winter finished quickly. It was a wonderful spring. Not the sort you get in central Russia, of course, but an Arctic one, with frosty nights and scorching sun. The sun turns your face black in three days and makes your eyes hurt if you don't put sun-glasses on in time. The partridges flocked together, the males squawking threateningly at any rivals who trespassed, intentionally or not, on their domains. Over the bare larches flew trails of early ducks, surveying the white, hungry expanses anxiously. Then all of a sudden the water began to flow, the melted larches creaked in the damp wind, then shone forth in their new finery, and the drone of mosquitoes was heard in the blazing sun. All in two weeks! The Arctic winter was forgotten, summer was here, so make hay while the sun shines!

For the last few months the old man had not seen Olga and he missed her. She had not been out on the porch even on warm days. The chief brought the papers to her himself.

"Is she ill?" the old man asked the stable-man's wife naively one day.

"Yes, yes," the woman replied happily and youthfully. "It'll all be over soon. But I don't know whether it's a boy or a girl."

"Already!" the old man was amazed.

"Not already, but soon."

The old man spent the summer in anxious anticipation, but he slept through the most crucial moment. It was what usually happened to him once every six months. He woke up late with a splitting headache. Alex was sitting on

a block by the window, smoking. The old man was not at all pleased to see him. He climbed out of his sleeping bag without saying a word.

"What's he after?" the old man thought grumpily. "He's never bothered to drop in before, now he suddenly turns up like this. Without so much as a by your leave."

Alex was sitting with his back to the window, staring at the old man, but seemed to be unaware of the old man's actions or movements. And only when the latter began to curse his condition in the choicest of language did Alex begin to register him. He lit a new cigarette from the butt of the old one, inhaled convulsively and said, equally convulsively, with long pauses between the words:

"Sent the wife to hospital, see. So I'm waiting, see."

"Where?" The old man did not understand him.

"To have the baby, see. They called a helicopter."

They said nothing more. The old man sat holding his head. The pain came in waves, like labour pangs. The old man hated Pesikov for being healthy and having shoulders as broad as an ox, and being able to chain-smoke without it upsetting him. True, Pesikov's face was not exactly beaming with joy as usual. It was dismal, and slightly frowning, and the few ringlets on the heavy forehead looked sweaty. The slightest sound from outside made the old man wince. Alex remained motionless, however, only the knots of muscle on his cheek bones tensed even more tightly. The knock came on the window, not at the door as they were expecting. The radio operator stuck a drawing of a fat-cheeked baby somewhat similar to Pesikov on the windowpane. There was no doubt about the child's sex. The radio operator had been most explicit.

Everything was clear, but it still had to be absorbed. For a few seconds Pesikov and the old man looked at each other. And for the first time the old man saw how a person's face can change in a few moments. But he had no time to marvel at it. Pesikov seized him with two enormous arms in such a vice-like embrace that the old man almost choked.

"I was right, see," Alexei bellowed into his ear. "Agreement on all points. Now there's another Pesikov."

In his joy he even forgot to leave out the offending

letter, or perhaps he did so on purpose, because he let go of the old man and repeated slowly:

"Pe-si-kov," lifting a finger into the air meaningfully.

"What are you waiting for?" shouted the radio operator outside. "Get over to the chief and make him cough up a bottle. There's good cause."

Alexei ran over to the chief. The old man followed him. The whole settlement awaited Pesikov's return. It was a long time before he emerged. Then he finally leapt out chuckling.

"No good, boys," he shouted, roaring with laughter. "He wouldn't cough up. 'You'd be sure to bash somebody about with joy,' he said. So he wouldn't cough up. There's a chief for you."

The boys sighed disappointedly, but Pesikov's laughter could be heard until late that evening coming from different parts of the settlement.

All the inhabitants turned out to welcome Olga home. The prospectors and timber-fellers came back specially from the field for the occasion. They fired volleys from rifles all day long and the chief let off half their supply of rockets. Pesikov walked up and down grinning stupidly with his son and heir from one end of the settlement to the other.

Olga tripped along beside her husband, asking him to bend down if someone wanted to look at her son. She quickly turned back a lacy corner, smiled, then protected Pesikov Junior again immediately. Not from the evil eye, of course, but from mosquitoes.

The next day a rope was strung up opposite the old man's window, and Olga kept running out to test whether the nappies were dry. She kept one ear pricked in the direction of the house. The old man had never seen her do that before. A little later a blue pram appeared on her porch. When the old man came home after putting in the bread, Olga would already be pushing it past the houses, rolling it over the larch roots. While it was hot Pesikov Junior spent the whole day outside. He had to get as much oxygen as possible before it turned cold. If any of the inhabitants stopped by the young mother, they did not stay for long.

Pesikov Junior grew so quickly that Olga could talk for hours about each minute of his life.

The old man did not have so many visitors now. The stable-man's wife stopped dropping in, and only her husband came. He exasperated the old man with his pregnant silences. Then the old man went away on leave.

It was not that he had thought about Olga and her baby all the time on leave, but whenever he saw a pram in the town where he was looking for his wife, his heart leapt and he felt warm inside.

And today, sitting by the window, he was looking forward most of all to seeing Olga. She would come onto the porch, huddled up against the cold, then jump back into the lobby, and after that Alex would appear on the porch, huge, his legs bent slightly from his heavy load. He would carry out a bucket of washing, the wooden clothes pegs hanging round his neck like a horse's collar.

Then they would hang up the washing together, but the things Alex put up would be re-pegged by Olga, as she gave her husband a ticking off. At any moment Olga might prick up her ears and speed into the house like an arrow. Pesikov would be left to hang up the washing on his own. When he finished, he would put the empty bucket on his head and beat it with his fists. He was a healthy lad, that Pesikov, but still silly, like a child. It was probably too cold to hang the washing outside now. And Alex was most likely away with the team felling timber.

...The old man's reflections were interrupted by the sound of barking. The pup, for whom the old man had not yet found a name, was bravely defending hearth and home. In the doorway stood the stable-man, clumsily trying to kick off the pup with a felt boot. Sometimes he succeeded and the pup skidded away under the bench, but as soon as it was on its feet again, it dashed even more furiously into the fray.

"Where did this whipper-snapper come from?" asked the stable-man in place of a greeting.

"From over there," replied the old man vaguely. There was no point in trying to explain how and why he had brought the pup several thousand kilometres. His answer was enough for the stable-man. He was already sitting down engaged in his favourite activity of keeping quiet. Seeing his master talking quietly with the visitor, the pup lay down on the old trouser leg, but now and then an excited quiver ran over his short coat.

"How are things?"

"I've just cleaned up Dolly."

"What's been happening here?"

"She's a real glutton. Eats me out of house and home. And where can I get her food? Now a deer needs no feeding. He finds food for himself." Tired after this long speech the stable-man said nothing more for a long time.

The old man was slightly hurt that the stable-man had not considered it necessary to ask about him. After all he had been away for quite a while. And the stable-man knew perfectly well why he had gone. The old man even thought that if he died and rose again from the dead, the stable-man would still go and sit down without greeting him, or at the most muttered a word or two about Dolly still hanging on and him having to look after her. The state of affairs in the hereafter would not have interested him in the slightest.

The old man also kept silent, waiting to see what would happen. But ten minutes passed without anything happening. The stable-man was still sitting, silent as a post, carefully inspecting something on the toe of his felt boot. He bent down, scraped it with his fingernail, and again fell into a deep reverie. What could he be thinking? Perhaps he was wondering how the "something" had got on his boot, or why and where. Had his wife spilt it when she was handing him that bowl of porridgy grue[1], or had he dirtied his boot in the stable... And if it was in the stable, when? Today or yesterday? There seemed to be no end to these reflections. The old man could not bear it any longer.

"What've you got there?"

"How could a moth get up here?" the stable-man said with dignity. "Would it fly all the way itself or come by aeroplane like us?"

The old man burst out laughing. So that's what it was. A moth had got into his felt boot. The old man would simply have noted the fact, but the stable-man had to reason it all out. So his mind was constantly engaged in finding explanations for things. He had no time for conversation...

They sat for about another half an hour. Then the old man poked the fire and put on the kettle.

"Well, I'm off," said the stable-man.

The kettle began to sing. The old man found his enamel mug, blew in it and put in a third of a packet of tea. If he'd put in less there would have been no taste, and he didn't like it any stronger. He thought he'd get some sleep. He was still on leave and he could sleep all day if he liked.

He was just finishing his second cup, when the stable-man's wife came hobbling in, one foot in a felt boot and the other wrapped in a flannel blanket and tied round with the belt of a dress.

"So the traveller's returned at last," she trilled on the threshold. "And we've been waiting all this time. But where's the missus?"

"Down the plughole," the old man replied rudely. He was obviously embarrassed by this warm welcome.

"Is she keeping well?"

"Nothing the matter with her."

"Did you remember us to her?"

"Aye. 'Tell them they're all crazy to live up there,' she said."

The stable-man's wife went into a huff. But not for long. She wasn't like that.

"Let her stay there if she's so smart. We'll get by," she said gaily, "as long as we're in good health."

But at the words "good health" the stable-man's wife suddenly stopped short, her face took on a suffering expression and she lifted the corner of her kerchief to her dry eyes.

"I'm a real invalid. Didn't get up for two weeks. Burnt my knee, by your oven, on the bank, curse it. Now my whole leg's swollen up. Haven't slept for nights."

"Who's doing the baking now?" the old man asked with interest.

The stable-man's wife's eyes lit up again. She moved the corner of her kerchief to her mouth. She was shaking with laughter.

"My old man. And the mess he's making of it." She laughed out loud, not trying to conceal it. "He used to come home as surly as a bear, but now he swears the house down. He's been waiting for you to come back. Said you fixed the oven on purpose, so it wouldn't bake. Even got the chief to take a look at it."

"And what did he say?"

"He said it was a complicated construction. He didn't see how you could have stopped it from working. Now the whole settlement is eating home-made rolls."

"Can't manage without me," said the old man proudly.

"I'll say," the woman agreed. "My bread wasn't too bad, but it wasn't a patch on yours. Your bread's nice and springy. Squash a loaf and it doesn't lose its shape. You're a real expert. But I can't get around now, see? Don't even know if I'll be alright by spring. What did you bring back, eh? Buy anything nice down there?"

"A friend," said the old man, pointing at the puppy.

"He's a real tiger and no mistake. My old man said he's so fierce you can't get near the door, but he's not barking at me."

"He don't bark at women."

"No, he'd be ashamed to do that, a great big bear-hunter like him. No one'll dare to burgle you now, grandad. Not with him to protect you. There's plenty of rough dogs around these days. Not properly trained. They grab a thief by the throat. But that one'll get him by the heel."

"How are the newly-weds?" the old man broke in.

"Well, Alex is out felling at the site and Olga's at home. The lad's growing fast. He's a lively little fellow. Sits up in his pram now and he held his head up very early. He's the spitting image of his Dad. When you call 'Nikita!' he gives a real laugh, the little devil. His mother fusses over him like a hen. She's got Alex well-trained. Just has to call him and he jumps up and flaps around them all day. Perhaps it's even a bit much. He's having a rest at the site now, though he'd like to be home, I bet. Came home just for the night, he did. And fifty miles there and back across the snow is no joke. Just grabbed a few hours' sleep, then had to set off back again. And it's hard work there. The chief ticked him off. 'No more cross country running, Pesikov,' he said. 'Do your month there, then you can have a week at home. But no running off and leaving the team.' Anyone else would have kept quiet, but Alex isn't like that. He had to answer back. 'Running home is wrong, is it, but it don't matter that we're clearing the ground for a major road and having to drag all our stuff along ourselves on our backs? The transport here only gobbles up food.' He meant Dolly. 'We're worse off than pack-horses up there.'

'She'd freeze to death with you,' the boss says to him 'She'd be alright,' says Alex. 'If that's the only worry, we'll put up a ten-person tent for her, big enough to take three horses. We could even heat it, if you're so worried about her health. But that's not the reason. Some people are too lazy to carry a bucket of water from the river. And it wouldn't hurt them either. They're not overworked.'

"Alex can't stop once he gets going. He should think before he says things like that. Here am I almost an invalid, can't get around. My old man wouldn't trust them with the horse. He'd want to go too. But never mind about me. Alex has got a wife too, the silly fool, and she needs more than two buckets a day. Two aren't enough for nappies anyway. She'd have to fetch it herself in the bitter cold. And the child would wake up and start crying. He can't be left alone. Might fall out of his pram and bang his head. But you men don't think about all that. You're only interested in getting your own way. And on he goes at the chief. The chief's sorry he started it. 'Don't get worked up, Pesikov,' he says. 'We'll think of something.' So now they're thinking, and what they'll come up with I don't know what to do. I've tried to get Olga to explain to him. As if I couldn't talk my old man round at night to anything. But she won't say yes or no. 'He knows best. Theirs is heavy work, we'll manage somehow down here.' She's too young. She doesn't understand."

At the other end of the settlement two shots from a twelve-bore rifle were heard.

"Well I never!" the stable-man's wife exclaimed angrily, half-rising from her seat. "And they call themselves workers. That's the chief going round waking them up. The diggers have come back from the site. They've stopped work. The explosive was delivered without detonators and they don't want to set light to it by hand," she explained, well-informed about all the matters at the base. "The lazy lot."

"It's hard work by hand, specially low down. There are no shafts and it's wet and muddy. When the frozen ground melts a bit it moves like mud if it's not supported and it might collapse," explained the old man who had this work himself.

"That's right. They came back filthy all over. But now they've had a wash and they're sleeping like logs. They've made up a game: whoever looks out of his sleeping bag first must cook the dinner. That's why they're all lying around and won't get up. They've had no food and the stove's not lit. The door's fastened on the inside. Goodness knows what's happening in there. Perhaps they've frozen to death. The chief's firing under the window. Sometimes he has to do it three times. Some people just don't care. Has he fired any more shots?" the stable-man's wife asked. She went deaf when she was talking, and knew that she had this failing.

"Not so far."

"So they got up at the first round today. They're getting ready to go back. The detonators have been sent already. The radiogram's come. It's nice and warm here for a chat, but I must be going now. Let's hope Ognevoy hasn't started doing the rounds. If he finds me here, he'll say I'm supposed to be in bed, not going visiting."

"He never comes in here."

"You never know. He's in a bit of a fix. He's got to prepare a report quickly and he can't do it without Olga. And she can't leave the baby. He came round to see me the other day and asked me to look after Nikita, so Olga could do some work. I thought it over and said no. If it weren't for my foot I'd be glad to. But what use am I like this? You have to pick him up and dandle him, and he's quite heavy now. And cook his food and change his nappies and heat the water. It's hard enough with two feet. So I said no."

The stable-man's wife sat down again.

"So he took it on himself. Olga gets down to work on the accounts, and he goes playing billy-goats with Nikita. When the baby cries, the chief pretends to be a billy-goat. 'Here's a big billy-goat gruff.' But this makes him cry all the more. Ognevoy begins to retreat. Then he starts apologising. 'Sorry,' he says, 'I didn't mean to frighten him.' And he's on the verge of tears himself. Olga said it's him who's afraid of Nikita. When she gave him Nikita to hold while she changed things in the pram, the chief began to sweat. He never looked after his own kids, so it's not surprising. So that didn't work. I don't

know what they'll do now. Are you back at work now or still on leave?"

"Don't know myself", said the old man. "Either I'm always on leave or always working."

"Yes, we're always on duty up here," said the stable-man's wife. "Well, you have a rest and I'll be on my way. My knee's beginning to hurt." She got up and walked to the door, limping exaggeratedly.

The old man could see the pup's coat bristling as it prepared to jump. When the stable-man's wife walked past its bed, it leapt onto her blanket-swathed foot with a growl.

"Oh, my goodness!" she cried and went for the door at the gallop. "Go to the devil with your filthy dog!" she cursed, kicking the pup with her "bad" foot and not realising what she was doing.

"Bite her, the fat old bag, Imp," cried the old man chuckling.

And so it was that the pup acquired its name.

Now the old man knew all the settlement news. He sat by the window for a while watching the bookkeeper's curtains to see if Olga's hand would appear or if she herself would look out. Perhaps she would decide to take Nikita out in the pram. It wasn't too cold yet. By Arctic standards you could even say it was warm, but perhaps you shouldn't take a baby out in it. One blast of the cold air could make it catch cold. But the old man wanted Olga and Nikita to come out so badly. If only she would push the pram to the other end of the settlement, the old man would go out to meet them on their way back. He'd say hello to Olga and take a peep in the pram. Perhaps he'd even have a short chat to her. What about? He did not know. But even if they didn't have a chat she would know the old man was here just in case... You never know, do you? Alex was away in the forest. She might need some help. The old man looked sadly at the chopped wood arranged neatly in two rows right under the roof. Pesikov had done a good job. Olga didn't need any help with that.

The old man went and lay down on the bed without taking off his clothes. It was hot in the cabin and he felt sleepy. He dreamed he was making a child's sledge, a small toboggan. For the runner he just took a piece of

wood and bent it across his knee, without steaming it. He managed it very well...

That evening the old man had another visitor. It was Ognevoy.

"I want to recall you from leave. It's an emergency," he said without any preamble. "We're up to our ears in a report and we need some help. While Olga is working in the office, you must look after her child. There's nothing to it." Ognevoy coughed slightly. "She'll come and feed it, so all you have to do is sit there and keep it happy. Talk to it, or rattle a spoon in a mug if it starts crying. That's all. So we'll see you there tomorrow morning. Okay?"

The old man was alone again. It grew dark quickly in the cabin. He did not want to light a candle. If Ognevoy had known what he had done to the old man, he would have gone on playing billy-goats with Nikita and he and Olga would have managed somehow to get the report done. The old man tried not to think about the next day, but could not help reflecting that it would be quite unlike any other day in his life. How many days there had been already, yet life had turned out to be quite short. It was not so much that life was short, but that less of it remained now than he had already lived through. And for some reason it was now that people chose to remind him he had not done the most important thing. Everything living is born and grows in order to give new life. Every tree sows its seeds around it. But what had there been in his life? What had he sown?

The old man had a hard night. Several times he tried to settle down on the bed and lay there in the pitch dark with open eyes. The cabin grew bitter cold, and the pup began to whine. Stuffing wood into the stove and stoking it up, the old man looked through the round eye of the ash-pit. He watched and listened to the fire being born, gaining strength, flaring up and roaring. The fire was cramped in the stove, but the only escape was to race through a small hole in the pipe. But why should it, when there was no fuel there? The fire howled with rage. If only it could break through the metal walls and escape to freedom, it would devour this tiny cabin in an instant and show the dry, crackling logs that it was their duty

to help it burn! It would embrace and caress them, then go rampaging over the forest, dancing wildly.

Then the fire would die down, the dying embers glimmering as they were covered with a layer of grey ash. It grew dark in the ash-pit. But it stayed warm in there for another hour-and-a-half, and both the pup sleeping on the old trouser leg and the old man hunched up on the bed saw the true purpose of fire as engendering heat.

The old man did not sleep all night. In the morning he went over to the bookkeeper's house. It had the fresh smell of a babe-in-arms. The old man greeted Olga. Her eyes were red from lack of sleep.

"Nikita usually sleeps well at night, but today he led me a real dance. Kept waking up and crying. Perhaps he had stomach ache. But he will be quieter in the daytime."

The old man looked into the pram where Nikita was sleeping. He was lying on his back with one hand on the blanket. The old man felt neither tenderness nor unexpected love—nothing. He was just pleased that when he had been awake last night this little person had also slept badly.

Olga left. The old man sat down by the pram and waited for Nikita to wake up. He had hever thought that watching a sleeping child could be so nice. Nikita's face was alive in sleep, and a great deal was obviously going on in that little head with its wisps of fair hair. His eyelashes moved constantly. They would flutter nervously, then stop for a moment casting dark shadows and begin to lift slowly as if to warn you that he was about to wake up. But he did not actually wake. He was hurriedly absorbing everything he had managed to see, hear from his mother, smell and taste. His thin eyebrows knitted menacingly or rose in surprise as a smile ran over his lips. Even in sleep Nikita was seeking to get the measure of life, exerting all his strength to understand what was good and what was bad.

The old man watched him, not noticing time pass.

Olga came in, panting hard from running.

"Hasn't he woken up yet?"

"No, he's still asleep," said the old man.

"Then I won't wake him. I'll come back in an hour. If he wakes up, he may be frightened of you. He doesn't know you yet," Olga explained to the old man, like a

school marm. "If he starts crying, do this to him and say 'tick-tick-tick'." She tickled her neck with her fingers and ran off.

The old man was offended. Why should Nikita be frightened of him when he woke up? He went up to the mirror, treading carefully. The face that stared back at him was a strange one, wrinkled, gloomy and haggard, with a straggling, bleached beard and small, puffy eyes. Not a sight to gladden the heart. Enough to frighten anybody. The old man felt sad. Olga had spoilt his mood. But he must get back to work, since he had taken on the job.

He sat down again next to the pram and gradually calmed down. There was nothing he could do about his "ugly mug" and that was that. Nikita would have to take him as he was. If necessary he would go "tick-tick-tick" as instructed. The old man looked at his coarse hands gnarled from hard work and the fingers with their tough nails, doubting that Nikita would like it very much if he dared to tickle him.

No, he could still bake bread, but for a nursemaid he was obviously a bit past it.

Nikita was beginning to wake up. He did it slowly. First he coughed, kicked out his feet, frowned, pulled the other hand onto the blanket and then, as if having checked that all the parts were working, finally opened his eyes. The old man felt shy and embarrassed in a way he had never felt before, not even in the presence of real high-ups.

Nikita stared at the old man for a few moments, studying him, then suddenly laughed and stretched out his arms to him.

"Good boy, he likes me," the old man smiled back at the child. "Yes, you and I are two of a kind, lad. Who said you'd be frightened of me." The old man bent over the pram and Nikita immediately grabbed him by the beard with both hands.

"Pull it, lad. Tear it all out, down to the last hair, I don't care."

When Olga came back the old man and Nikita were chatting quietly and seemed to understand each other perfectly, although Nikita's reply to all the old man's questions was "Pouff-ff".

"I see you're getting on well together," said Olga, undoing her cardigan as she walked.

"Aye aye." The old man felt embarrassed and walked out.

While Olga was feeding Nikita, the old man fed the pup and reproved it.

"You're no good, Imp, you silly dog. What can you do? Only sleep, eat, and bark. You'll never manage 'Pouff-ff-ff' even when you're a full-grown dog. Your mouth's not right for it. You can go 'bow-wow', but not 'pouff-ff-ff'."

The pup lifted one ear and listened disapprovingly to the old man. He was jealous of the unfamiliar warm scent that his master had brought home with him. The pup sensed unknown danger in that smell.

Before the old man had spent nearly all his free time by the window. When he had finished the baking and had his breakfast, he would move up a block, scratch out a little spy-hole if the window was iced up, then sit, watching and waiting. A whole tiny world opened up before him. Not much happened in a short winter day at the settlement. The day gradually melted away before your eyes followed by the Arctic night, and then if there was no moon you could not see much at all. But the old man still sat there by force of habit. Each year in mid-winter the Northern lights began, but they did not impress the old man. He was too used to them. And although each year they were different, they were always followed by a very cold spell. And during the extreme cold people rarely visited one another. There were days when nobody came to see the old man at all, not even the stable-man's wife who usually went round to all the houses at least once a day.

When the world shrunk to the four walls of the cabin, his memory revived the most unpleasant recollections. One of them was particularly painful, even though it had happened at least ten years ago. He and his mate had been digging shafts down to the bedrock. His mate was younger and incredibly strong, the devil. He could bend a 30 cm-long nail around his finger. But he didn't like working in the shaft. As long as you could throw up the rock with a spade he would dig, but lower down and as

far as the bedrock the old man did the work while his mate was on the winch.

"You're small. It's easier for you down there. You don't need so much air."

The old man would gouge out a hole, put in a charge and load the rock into the tub after the explosion. And so they worked. One day the old man had gouged out holes and shouted up:

"Send down some dynamite and we'll set it off."

But his mate called back:

"Get into the tub and let's go up. I'm hungry, and I've forgotten the detonators in the tent."

They had lunch. His mate began to lower the old man, but stopped after about three metres.

"I've still got the detonators in my pocket."

"Well, put them in your mitten and throw them down. I'll catch them."

His mate started to do something up there. The old man waited, one leg in the tub, the other hanging over the edge. It was about ten metres to the bottom. The bedrock was deep here.

"What're you up to?"

"Won't be a minute," he heard.

Suddenly the tub began to drop and the old man barely managed to grab his cap and stop it falling off. Why on earth bother about his cap! If he had fallen the ten metres to the bottom, he would have been crushed to pieces by the tub. With his cap on or not. But this did not happen. His mate put his shoulder under the winch handle and somehow managed to lower the tub to the bottom with one arm. When the old man realised he was still alive, he shouted to his mate:

"Misha! Misha!"

Silence. The old man hauled down the rope and climbed to the top. There he realised what had happened. His mate had let go of the handle while he was getting out the detonators. Misha survived, although he spent a long time in hospital and his arm was never the same again. He went away after that. Goodness knows where. It's a big country.

The old man was not to blame in the slightest. It was Misha's fault. But he could not forget the incident and would remember it most of all in the very cold spells,

when the spy-hole clouded over and you had to breathe on the window pane and scrape it with your finger. For some reason he felt sure his former mate was also sitting somewhere like this, thinking badly of him. "Why did that old ex-convict have to hurry me, and why was I fool enough to listen to him?"

Why indeed...

But the old man had not sat by the window for a whole fortnight now. There wasn't time. He got up two hours earlier than usual to do the baking and delivered the loaves himself, without waiting for the stable-man to come and collect them.

Hurriedly heating a tin of meat and giving some to Imp, the old man would gobble it down too fast to even taste it, then rush off to the bookkeeper or, rather, to Nikita.

The hours between feeds passed so quickly that the old man began to think Olga was coming back so often because she did not trust him. He waited impatiently for her to finish the feed, and no longer left the house, but simply turned his back.

Life in the settlement had lost all interest for the old man. The only important thing was what happened to Nikita. The child changed so much in a single day, or rather night, when the old man had to return to his cabin, that in the morning the old man had to get used to him again.

He would smile differently, gurgle and blow bubbles differently, try to put his toes in his mouth and even play up in a completely new way. But what pleased the old man most of all was that Nikita always recognised him. Obviously for him the old man did not change.

The old man would change Nikita's nappies and rompers, warm up water in the bottle with a teat and talk to him all the time. What he actually said to Nikita the old man did not remember, but it was something so nice and instinctive that he could not repeat or remember it.

At night the old man dreamed of Nikita. And in the morning he used to wonder why people said it was bad luck to dream about a child. In all his life the old man had never known two such happy weeks as these.

But his happiness stopped as unexpectedly as it had begun. One morning the old man knocked at the book-

keeper's window as usual and went up to the porch.

"Who's that?" Olga asked, without opening the door.

"You're sleeping late," said the old man huffily. He was looking forward to his meeting with Nikita. He could already see the cheeks flushed with sleep and sense his smell. The unexpected obstacle—the closed doors and the "who's that?"—offended him. He was used to being awaited eagerly and only having to tap lightly on the window before Olga sang out gaily:

"Come in, the door's open."

The old man stood on the porch, but Olga was obviously not going to open the door. She seemed to have gone off into the room. Finally the door was unlatched and Olga came out onto the porch with a sheepskin coat over her shoulders and felt boots on her bare feet.

"I'm so sorry. I forgot to tell you that we finished the report yesterday, so I'll be at home now. Thank you so much. You were such a help."

The old man maintained a gloomy silence.

"I don't know how I could have forgotten to tell you. Nikita and I haven't got up yet. We can sleep in today. Come round later and have a cup of tea."

The old man did not reply to this either. He walked down slowly from the porch. The pup greeted him barking happily as if it understood that the old man had not come back just to throw him a piece of bread and put some water in his bowl, but had returned to his old life and, consequently, to the pup as well.

The old man kicked him away and sat down on his bed.

"Well, hound, they've squeezed your master dry like an old lemon and thrown him away. 'Come round and have a cup of tea,'" he imitated Olga. "You can keep your blessed tea."

The pup listened carefully to the old man, wagging its tail guiltily.

"It's not your fault, lad. You and I are in the same boat." The old man stretched out a hand to the pup. The pup licked it.

The weather turned bitter cold. The frost stung like a mad thing. The diggers and timber-fellers came back from their sites to the settlement. Work was impossible at almost sixty degrees under. It was hard enough to

breathe. People rarely left their houses, and if it had not been for the shimmering haze over the chimneys you would have thought the settlement was deserted. The houses became covered with hoar frost and were now all white. The old man still baked bread, because people still had to eat. Every night he dreamt of Nikita, and now he believed that dreaming of a child meant misfortune.

The old man was lonely. That winter he had only seen Nikita twice. Once on New Year's Eve when they had a get-together in the chief's house and Olga brought her son to show them all, and the other time at the beginning of March when the old man's baking went wrong for a short while.

For two days the old man held out, but on the third he went to Olga. Pesikov was back at the site with his team. This time he had got permission to take Dolly and the stable-man with him. The old man stood on the porch, getting his breath back and plucking up his courage. He could hear Olga talking to Nikita.

"So he's not asleep," the old man decided and pushed the door.

Olga was ironing. Nikita was standing in his vest holding the edge of the pram, shaking it and laughing. They both looked up at the old man. He stood in the doorway looking at them, but his eyes were watering either from drink or from the cold. Olga was saying something to him, but he did not listen. He just stood, grasping the door frame with one hand and watched Nikita shake the pram, squatting in it and almost falling out.

Nikita stopped smiling and his eyes showed fear of the strange man who had suddenly appeared for some unknown reason. The old man tried to smile at him, but Nikita howled and stretched out his arms to his mother. He did not recognise the old man.

Olga ran up, lifted her son out of the pram and stood in the middle of the room, as if protecting him. She waited to hear what the old man had to say. The old man had a great deal to say, so much that it was better not to start. He turned abruptly, bumped into the door, and almost tripped over the threshold into the lobby.

The larch fell with a cracking sound, breaking the branches of the neighbouring trees. As the cloud of snow rose up, there was an instant silence on the timber site. Pesikov had pulled one of the cutters, Ivakhin, out of the way of the falling tree and had been trapped under it himself. He did not even cry out. Now he lay face downwards, driven deep into the snow. The cloud that had been raised by the falling tree was now settling on him quietly, as if on a corpse.

Ivakhin stood by him shouting, but not a sound came out of his gaping mouth. The other cutters had dropped their axes and were all looking at Ivakhin. Then they rushed as a man to Pesikov and began to lift the tree in silence, breathing heavily and getting in one another's way. They raised it, carried it a few yards off and put it down carefully. Pesikov's back bore the mark of the tree which continued in the snow on either side of his body. Nobody dared turn him onto his back. The cutters stood round their leader in a tight circle, afraid to look one another in the eye.

Eventually one of them plucked up courage. He nudged his neighbour, then walked over and stood by Pesikov's head. They turned Pesikov over and he groaned weakly, running his tongue over his lips.

"He's alive," they gasped in unison. Then they rushed about, making a bed of branches, put Pesikov on it and covered him with padded jackets. He groaned again as they moved him.

"Bear up, lad. Bear up."

The stable-man trotted up to the site from the tents on Dolly's back, swaying from side to side and clinging on for dear life. He wasn't much of a horseman.

The axes rang. They made a rough sledge out of thin trunks, binding them together with their trouser belts. Each of them was thinking the same thing: who would get Alex to the base. It was fifty kilometres, quite a trek. If Alex had been able to speak he would have decided quickly: you and you. But he was lying motionless under their padded jackets, and they had to decide without him. So each of them wondered: would I be able to make it? And each decided: better someone else. They were all ready to take their leader, but some were stronger than others. Two men were needed, the two most reliable.

And they themselves must volunteer for the job. One would have to lead Dolly by the bridle and the other to run along behind keeping an eye on the sledge. When the stable-man walked up to the horse, and Yuri Kalinkin began to tuck the padded jackets under Alex on the stretcher everyone agreed.

If the two had come forward, they would stick it out. It was not a question of showing off in front of the others, but of saving a man's life. Yuri was young and strong; he had been demobilised from the army last spring.

The stable-man and Kalinkin took off their padded jackets and trousers, so they were just in their underclothes. They were given two flasks of sugar. They didn't need water, because they could use snow. Dolly was also given some sugar, and then they set off.

When the voices of the stable-man and Kalinkin could no longer be heard, the cutters returned to their tents. There was no question of working. Then it was discovered that Ivakhin had disappeared. They had all seen him standing over the leader his mouth wide open and twitching convulsively. Then he had disappeared, when and where nobody knew. They did not go and look for him. If a person disappears at a moment like that, he's bound to come back sometime. He might get a fever, of course, but serve him right.

Kalinkin and the stable-man worked out their plan as they went. They would make their way down to the river and walk along the ice to the base. There was no less snow on the river and they would probably lose about five or six kilometres, but it was better than dragging the sledge through the forest. It was eight kilometres to the river. In half-an-hour the stable-man, Kalinkin and Dolly were covered with a thick layer of frost. But they were unbearably hot, even though it was about minus thirty.

They sucked snow as they went. Only Dolly was unable to slake her thirst. The stable-man dragged her along relentlessly, not letting her flag for an instant. It was probably harder for him than for the horse. He was blazing the way. When the slope down to the river became steep, Dolly, whose front legs only were shoed, began to slip and scrape her fetlocks on the sharp stones. The track they left was red with her blood. From time to time

she slipped and sat on her haunches. The stable-man would stop for a moment, turn his white, flat-looking face towards her and punch her head with his fist. Then the horse got up shuddering and trotted on. It was not trotting in the real sense, of course. They stumbled and wallowed in the snow, sometimes falling, and it was much harder than the fastest trot. From time to time Kalinkin would bend over the sledge and stick his hand under the padded jackets to feel Pesikov's bare chest. He could not tell whether the team-leader's heart was still beating but he could feel his warmth.

The trees began to thin. They had reached the river. They wanted to plunge into the deep, powdery snow and lie there until their bodies cooled down, until the blood stopped drumming in their ears and throat. Dolly's legs were trembling slightly. This was the first lap. They had covered it in an hour and forty minutes.

"We're making bad time," the stable-man panted, and on they went.

The snow on the river was just as deep as in the forest, but walking was easier, and the stable-man quickened the pace. An hour later they made a short stop, poured a handful of sugar into their mouth and washed it down with snow. The stable-man offered Dolly some sugar too, but she did not even sniff it. She plunged her head deep into the snow and tried to swallow it, but the few drops of moisture that reached her parched throat did not refresh it. On the contrary, they seemed to add fuel to the fire that had begun in her old lungs. Her groins were dark with sweat. They rose often, to fall again straightaway.

After the sugar the men went even faster, and Dolly had to exert herself to keep up with them.

Only Alex was unaware of this mad race. He felt as if he were floating in a grey, constantly swirling mass which he could not grasp with his consciousness. In this mass he had to balance his arms and legs all the time. If he were to lose his balance for a moment, he would go plunging down headlong into a black abyss. He knew this for sure and did not give in to it.

Kalinkin was alright for about thirty kilometres. He kept thinking that he must change places with the stable-man. Then he found himself dropping behind. At first he lagged a pace or two behind and thought he had done

so on purpose, to put a flask back or grab a handful of snow, say. Then he put on a spurt and ran alongside the sledge again. But the gap began to get larger without him realising it. He put on a spurt, and it was one pace to the sledge, then one-and-a-half, then two... For a while he ran along about ten paces behind the sledge, still hoping he would get his second wind. Then suddenly he knew he was going to fall down. He stopped for a moment, called out and fell face downwards, panting and sucking the snow into his wide-open mouth.

The stable-man stopped Dolly and walked back to Kalinkin. He helped him to the sledge and said curtly: "Hold on."

Kalinkin caught hold of the traces with both hands and staggered alongside the sledge, thus adding to Dolly's already excessive load.

Dolly felt with all her being that after the stop she could not take another step, but the stable-man tugged firmly at the halter and the horse went off, as she thought, at the gallop. She threw out her front and drew in her hind legs, but moved no faster than a person walking. Nevertheless she covered ten kilometres in this fashion, draining her last ounces of strength.

Kalinkin had gradually recovered and was now running alongside the sledge. It should have been easier for Dolly now, but she was past caring. Now she would have drawn three times the load. She was on her last legs. Finally the moment came when she ceased to hear her own breathing. For a few seconds more she heard an irregular wheezing, but that was the stable-man.

Suddenly Dolly felt better. She saw the river which she had walked along to the settlement a few years ago. It was summer and very hot. The gadflies and mosquitoes were biting mercilessly, but alongside her flowed the cold, clear, blue water and you could plunge your head in it and drink to your heart's content. There was grass growing by the river, just a few tufts, but perfectly edible...

Dolly stopped. The stable-man looked round. She was collapsing on her side. The stable-man unwound the leather rein from his hand and threw it into the snow. He walked round the horse, still not believing she would never get up again. Kalinkin came up and looked enquiringly at the stable-man as if he were a commander.

"Looks as if she's a goner," said the stable-man dispassionately. He wanted to give Dolly a kick in the belly with his felt boot, but thought better of it and began to free her from the harness, the last bonds linking her to man.

They donned the harness themselves, made a short semi-circle round the dead horse, and went on with the sledge. It wasn't far now, about ten kilometres, or twelve...

Alex was carried straight into the house on the sledge. The padded jackets that had been covering him were tossed in a pile in the corner. He lay there bare-headed, his curly hair looking like a wig. His cheeks and temples were sunken as if he had walked this incredible cross-country trek with the stable-man and Kalinkin.

All the people of the base were there, except the radio operator. The old man looked at Olga. Her elbows stuck out sharply under the shawl thrown over her shoulders. Her cheeks were sunken too.

They all stood silently. Only Kalinkin and the stable-man sat on stools by the wall. Their hands hung limply between their knees, almost touching the floor. They were a sorry sight in their dirty, sweat-stained underclothes, and both felt guilty.

The one thing everybody wanted was for Alex to come round. He probably wanted it too, because his eyelashes had already fluttered several times, and everyone strained forward as if to help him complete this hard task, but then the eyelashes stopped moving and Alex's face grew even thinner: he seemed to be shrinking before their very eyes.

It was painful to watch. Kalinkin began to cough violently. He knew it was out of place, but couldn't help it. The cough was choking him. He rolled his eyes, grasped his chest, and shook his head with an apologetic expression. The people turned away.

Suddenly the old man saw Olga's face brighten. She rushed up to Alex and kneeled down in front of him. Alex put a hand on her shoulder and his eyes searched for someone else. They rested on Kalinkin.

"Shame on you, lad. I told you to always keep your eyes open!"

The sweat glistened on his forehead and he lost consci-

ousness again. Everybody realised he was in a bad way. Only Olga refused to believe it. Her face was still joyful, even when she looked at Kalinkin. Alex had been wrong. He had mistaken Kalinkin for Ivakhin. At that moment Ivakhin was lying on the radio operator's porch, vomiting. He had arrived an hour before, so the helicopter had already made two large circles over the timber fellers' tents while they stamped out in the snow the message: "Fly to Stationary Base."

For an instant the helicopter froze in the air, choosing the right course, then sped away. A few minutes later its buzz could hardly be heard, then it disappeared altogether.

The first person in Stationary Base to hear the helicopter was Ivakhin. He crawled down from the porch, wiped his mouth with a handful of snow and staggered towards the house. There was no need to say anything. As soon as he opened the door, they all heard the familiar sound of the MI-4. Alex had to be carried to the clearing but then it was discovered that Olga had not really thought what to do with Nikita. Or rather, she had firmly resolved to take him with her. But now, as she rushed round the room snatching first a sports bag with all the things she and her husband would need, then a little bundle with Nikita's things, she became confused. She wanted to be with her husband and her son all the time, but even now when she was surrounded by people eager to help this was very difficult. And who could say what it would be like where they were going. She did not even know if she would be allowed to stay with her husband in the hospital ward and to take her son with her.

All this was so confusing and worrying that for the first time since they had carried in her husband Olga sat down on a packed bag and began to cry.

"You must leave Nikita, Olga," the chief told her.

Olga raised her wet, horror-stricken eyes to him: How could she leave her son behind? That was impossible.

"Yes," Ognevoy repeated. "You won't be able to manage with the two of them there. We'll look after him. I promise."

Today the chief did not seem so tall and when he spoke his Adam's apple jerked nervously on his long neck. He was responsible for everything that happened. Respon-

sible for a stupid accident, perhaps, or for the fact that he was a bad chief. He did not want to be a bad person.

There was no time to waste or think things over. Olga's maternal instinct told her that she should leave Nikita. It was hard, but the only way. She ran her eyes over all those present, stopping for a moment at the stable-man's wife, but then alighting on the old man. She could not say anything but her eyes asked for her. He crossed the room and stood by the pram.

Someone picked up Olga's luggage. They lifted Alex and carried him off. Olga and the old man remained. Olga went up to the pram, pulled back the blanket and kissed her son several times. Nikita smiled to his mother in his sleep. Then she ran out of the house.

The old man moved in with Nikita. He did not like to sleep in someone else's bed, so he took a camp bed with him. There was a kind of tremulous joy in the way he lived now. He fed Nikita, bathed him and played with him. When he changed his clothes he could tickle his tummy and Nikita would gurgle happily.

It was strange to feel someone else's child growing more and more close to him each day. The old man called Nikita his grandson and was very upset when the other inhabitants of the settlement would not recognise his monopoly.

Everyone who came to the house, to see the old man, thought he had the right to ask:

"And how's our Nikita today? What's he been up to?"

The old man would maintain a gloomy silence. If he were to confide in anyone what pleasure and worry Nikita had given him, it would be the boy's mother alone. The old man had discovered in himself a quality hitherto unsuspected: he was a jealous person.

Even the advice of the stable-man's wife, who probably knew better than he what a child needed, he mistrusted and ridiculed, often interrupting her:

"You're too late, old girl. He's not a babe-in-arms anymore. We know what we want, don't we, grandson?"

"Grandson now, is it?" said the stable-man's wife huffily and went away.

"Yes, it is, and let's not argue about it," the old man murmured to himself thoughtfully. "Let's not argue."

Nikita was hardly ever ill, perhaps because he had always breathed the pure forest air and grown up in the harsh but healthy climate of Arctic Yakutia. But the old man thought it was mainly due to him.

The old man would talk about this only to the pup when he went to feed it and occasionally let it into the cabin to get warm. Over the months the pup had grown quite a lot and acquired the thick, but not shaggy, coat which had helped his ancestors survive the hardships of life on the streets. If it were not for his mischievous puppy eyes, Imp could have passed for a fully-grown dog.

"There, boy, you've already grown up, see, but children need more looking after than your lot," the old man would say proudly.

Imp would wag his tail in agreement. It was hard not to agree with his master: he fed Imp regularly and occasionally even scratched him behind the ear.

So the days passed. Two lots of mail had arrived, but nothing from Olga. The letter from her came a month later from Irkutsk. She wrote that the doctors had diagnosed damage to the spine. Alex could sit up now and eat on his own, but the treatment would take a long time, no one could even say how long, and he might lose the use of his legs.

Olga thanked everyone for looking after Nikita, especially the old man, but she could not forgive herself for having left him. She simply did not know what to do. She couldn't leave her husband, but she missed her son terribly. She had been advised to try to get Alex moved to Moscow, to the Institute of Traumatology, but what about Nikita? She could not be parted from him any longer. She dreamed about him, without any clothes on for some reason, and that was bad. They must write and tell her how he was. She would try to work out what to do.

The same day they clubbed together and sent a money order to Olga with a telegram that read: "Nikita well, don't worry, tell Alex to get better soon. All thinking of you."

At the end of May a radiogram arrived: "Alex and I leaving for Moscow next week. Must have Nikita. Please help. Olga."

The chief went to the old man and handed him the telegram.

"The plane service won't be able to help us, not even

in a fortnight's time. And the winter lorry route's nearly finished because of the thaw. We rang Kuzmich and his last convoy is on the way back. It'll pass here tomorrow. That's the only chance."

"But why? Why upset the child?" said the old man angrily.

"I've thought about that. But it's not right to upset the mother either. Will you take him?" Ognevoy asked after a long pause.

"Who else?" said the old man. "If somebody's got to take him it will have to be me. How would she manage with the two of them..."

"You've got your half-yearly leave. We'll use that if necessary. So get packed."

## 3

Loktiev was returning from the mine with an empty lorry. It was the last run of the season. As usual he was driving well ahead of the others. He could not rid himself of the habit.

The spring water was gushing round the wheels, but Loktiev thought they could have made one more run. But the people at the top had decided to play safe and announced that this was the last. Well, that was their business. While he was still some distance from the turning for Stationary Base Loktiev saw a crowd of people there.

"A fond farewell or a mass desertion?"

People were waving frantically at him. He stopped. An old man got into the cabin and was handed a child wrapped in a blanket: it seemed to be asleep. They set off. The people went on waving for some time and shouting:

"Write and let us know how you get on. Write more often, she hasn't got time. And if you need anything..."

"So it was a fond farewell," Loktiev decided, thinking regretfully that now he would not be able to smoke for an hour or two.

Loktiev had recognised the old man at once, but did not show it. He stared tensely at the road. What had happened to him in the last few months did not make him feel like talking.

When he returned from the first run Loktiev found a telegram on the bed in the hostel. And the fact that the telegram had been endorsed by the doctor had helped him to get there in time.

His mother was still alive, but could no longer talk. It was so strange and unnatural, that he sat by her hardly saying a word for two days—until she died. So she was not able to tell him those important words which make mothers try their hardest to wait until their children come, and only made the sign of the cross over him furtively on the first day. On the second day she could no longer lift her hands and just moved her fingers in Loktiev's palms. Then her fingers stopped moving too.

Loktiev spent the customary forty days in the village and then returned to the North. He knew what he must do. He decided not to show himself at the office, bought a ticket to Perevalny and went straight to Larissa. He thought that after what had happened to him she would forgive him. She was that sort of person.

But he was met by a short, tow-haired lad. How did he know that Loktiev was not a neighbour or simply a passer-by? Sergei didn't even have time to introduce himself.

"I'm Oleg," the lad said quietly, and swinging his shoulders, he punched Loktiev in the nose. The blood gushed down his face. Perhaps he exclaimed or uttered some other sound, for the door opened and he saw Larissa's frightened eyes.

"Oleg, don't you dare hit him!" she cried, but Oleg pushed her roughly inside, leaned back against the door and gave Sergei two more skilful and cruel punches in the face.

Loktiev was stronger than the other fellow, he could sense it, but he did not resist. Something stopped him. He wiped away the blood with the back of his hand and looked at Oleg.

Oleg had the calm, concentrated eyes of a qualified boxer.

When Loktiev went out into the street he suddenly realised that he would never be happy without Larissa, and she was unlikely to be happy with this fellow who was so sure of himself and his strength.

In his long runs Sergei had constantly thought how

to put things right, but could not come up with anything. It had been easier to bring things to an end.

Loktiev drove the lorry, glancing from time to time at the old man. He looked quite different from when Loktiev had seen him on the first run. His wrinkles were not at all frightening, just the normal wrinkles of an elderly person who had worked for a long time in the wind and cold. The old man looked very happy. He kept fussing and whispering the same thing over and over again to his grandson:

"And what will we tell Mummy when we get there? 'We can walk now, Mum,' that's what we'll tell her."

So far Nikita had taken only one step and that was holding on to the old man's finger, but the old man hoped that when they met Olga he would start walking properly.

Loktiev wondered why people sometimes invented all sorts of strange things about themselves. The old man was obviously just an ordinary old-age pensioner and grandfather.

The old man had just turned forty-nine. He had a long way to go to an old-age pension. But what did that matter to someone who had just started a new life...

# Anatoly Kim

## THE NIGHTINGALE ECHO

### 1

Lying on the ground, arms outstretched, he suddenly saw bent over him the woman's face more precious to him than the heavens that were fading away irrevocably in his eyes. And, drawing in this beautiful, despairing face with a farewell glance, Otto Meissner set off quietly on his final journey to tedious and distasteful eternity. He was departing from life swiftly and steadily, but it seemed slow and wearisome, and from time to time, as if looking back, he was surprised to see the abandoned world growing dark rapidly, but not going out entirely, as if its light would never be engulfed by darkness. Then finally it narrowed to a small round dot, and in the middle of this shining droplet was a woman's head with smoothly combed dark hair. Soon she too became almost imperceptible, the light shrank to a pin point, flared up and then went out.

Life was enqulfed by the boundless darkness from which, not of his own free will, but compelled by these words, this winding stream of flowing lines, Otto Meissner found himself on the damp quay of a river jetty on a rainy, summer night in 1912. The river was black and huge and, its far reaches, separated from the jetty by many versts, shone in a long strip of dull silver. Above this fortuitous gleaming of the nocturnal river, along the edge of the heavens stretched the narrow bank, concealed in darkness, and above it, as if continuing the cold luminiscence of the water, flowed the broad river of the heavens under a ragged canopy of stormclouds. The black, curving line of the far bank looked to Otto Meissner like a fragile bridge

over the shadowy Styx, and closeby, amid the patter of the rain and the lapping of the waves, he could sense the presence of old Charon and hear his angry cough in the gloom. Evidently the servant of Hades was displeased that the turn of the century had brought this airy bridge over which all could pass at will, without having recourse to the old ferryman's services. His supply of copper coins would cease now. And, picturing the old man's gloomy displeasure, Otto Meissner smiled commiseratingly in the darkness. He walked up and down the deserted jetty, feeling the long planks give under his feet.

A vague sensation, like a faint recollection that he had been on this jetty before, stirred in Otto Meissner's breast. He felt like the strange double of another Otto Meissner who had existed long ago or would exist in the future. But then he reflected sensibly that this ghostly past and, even more, the future were beyond his comprehension; and he could recall joylessly in the rain only that he was a Master of Philosophy, a graduate of the illustrious Königsberg University, and that the humdrum academic knowledge he had had to acquire in order to obtain this academic title still cluttered up his head like a heavy burden. This acquired knowledge, he felt, merely prevented him from approaching the state which, as Zen Buddhists teach, precedes the instantaneous and irrational comprehension of the most profound truths of the universe. But for the time being he was forced to recall that his inflexible and strong-willed *Grossvater*, who had brought him up and been a true father to him, Otto Meissner, had sent his grandson to travel round the world, which was why he, the grandson, was now standing on a remote rain-drenched jetty on a wet dark night, with the vast Asian River Amur lapping beside him.

The boat that had brought Otto Meissner now vanished into the darkness, its three lights flashing in the hollow depths of the night. It sailed off up the Amur, this boat, bearing Nefedov, the mate with gleaming teeth and high cheekbones, who had been to Moscow and St Petersburg and could speak French. Wiry, small and bandy-legged like a cavalryman, the mate could not understand that his French was as bad as it was ridiculous, but he was cheerful and kind, this "Frenchman" with the Kalmuck face, and in his cabin he had entertained his chance

visitor with excellent salted fish, a little vodka and some spirited playing on a seven-stringed guitar. Otto Meissner recalled this man now with sadness and gratitude. Thinking about him, he touched the envelope in the pocket of his travelling coat with a letter of recommendation handed to him in Khabarovsk by the wealthy Russian merchant Opoelov with whom the itinerant Master of Philosophy's *Grossvater*, Friedrich Meissner, had done considerable business for many years.

The instructions which the grandfather had drawn up for his grandson before sending him on his long journey contained many points. One of them read: "...and also to visit the Russian area of the Far East on the left bank of the River Amur, where the local population of Korean emigrants do cultivate the opium poppy in order to obtain from it a viscous mass of high exchange value on the markets of China; and, therefore, to make a full study at the place of production of all processes of cultivating the poppy and extracting from it the afore-mentioned opium mass with the aim:

a) of ascertaining the possibilities of cultivating the opium poppy on the cultured plantations in Europe;

b) of determining an approximate capital investment figure for obtaining a monopoly on all trading in opium on the banks of the Amur;

c) of obtaining further useful knowledge for a young, questing mind."

Otto Meissner, who had a genuine affection for his powerful grandfather and cared not what he did in this world, had already travelled obediently half-way round the world and now found himself on this jetty with the merchant Opoelov's letter in his pocket. The letter contained instructions to one of the local Korean barge-owners and opium dealers, who was most dependent on Opoelov's millions and should therefore be of considerable assistance to Otto Meissner in his expedition. But, having arrived at the place and watched the boat lights gradually disappear, the traveller was now alone with his luggage. No one else had alighted at the jetty.

The solitude of a strange place on a rainy night was intense and mysterious. The Master walked up and down the jetty, for some reason unbeknown to him listening hopefully to the old man's rasping cough which carried

over the invisible water and seemed to be growing nearer.

And indeed, shortly afterwards the figure of the coughing Charon emerged near the jetty, standing out faintly against the dark water, bending and straightening up, rowing an invisible boat. An oar struck against a supporting log. Tying the boat to the side of the jetty, where some more barely distinguishable boats were rocking, the rower hoisted himself onto the platform grunting and muttering quietly, first heaving up one leg, then kneeling on the edge. And when, still muttering inaudibly, he got to his feet and walked towards Otto Meissner, the traveller took a step in his direction. The man said something gutteral and frightened, but receiving no reply he leaned timidly forward, staring into Otto Meissner's face. The Master coolly inspected the startled eyes, high cheekbones and goatee beard of the tall old Asian. On his head he wore a straw hat, broad and flat as a tray, tied with string under his lower lip. He was dressed in a wet white top and similar trousers. Having stared his fill at the stranger, he stepped back and again uttered some enquiry. Otto Meissner who had not understood a word, also began to talk, speaking Russian and trying to make his voice sound as convincing and peaceful as possible.

"Merchant... Where does the merchant Panteleimon Tian live?"

At the mention of this name the old man shook his head vigorously and, as if afraid, turned round and rushed off the jetty, his feet thudding on the wet planks. Disappearing into the darkness, he again revealed his presence by coughing harshly in the invisible hills on the high bank. Otto Meissner merely sighed sadly and proceeded once more to pace up and down the jetty. He reflected that all common working people the world over, in both hemispheres, be they black Bushmen, brown peons or white farm-labourers on a Baltic farm, are engaged from childhood to old age in the anxious pursuit of their daily bread and exist, if one imagines it abstractly, moving in a horizontal direction only. Whereas man, born with this noble title, should be constantly striving upward, vertically. And, sighing once more, the Master looked at the sky, in the hope of seeing at least one star there. But there was nothing above him save darkness and the dull drumming of the rain.

But soon he saw two bright lights appear on the invisible heights of the bank and float along jerkily side by side, like a pair of wandering spirits, their path following the crooked line of the hilly ground. The lights would vanish, reappear, and vanish again, then suddenly appeared close up, and Otto Meissner saw two hunched figures with round paper lanterns in their hands hurrying down to the jetty. Slipping on the steep descent, they negotiated the wet, clayey path and ran onto the platform one after the other. It turned out to be an elderly woman in a tucked-up skirt and a short, strong youth, both bare-foot, with pointed bags over their heads. Although it was not slippery on the jetty, they continued to crouch low, planting their feet wide apart and lighting the way with the yellow lanterns held low. They came up to the traveller, bowed to him, and picked up his luggage without a word. Only the youth, glancing sideways at the new arrival with his hot and admiring eyes flashed a brief smile.

Otto Meissner did not ask any questions and set off silently behind the two unexpected porters. By the dull glow of the lantern he could see before him a moving strip of muddy pathway and the muscular calves and wet heels of the boy, who was squelching along in the sticky mud, his trousers rolled up to his knees. The woman had put the heavy travelling-bag on her head, holding it with one hand, and was well ahead of the other two. The boy was carrying the bundle with the traveller's camp-bed, and the Master himself had the old sea chest with firearms and papers under his arm. Now and then the boy would stop, look round and lift the lantern higher, waiting for the traveller to catch up.

The difficult ascent along the slippery path soon ended, and only then did Otto Meissner see the village: a mass of windows lit dimly from within and buried in the wet foliage of bushes and trees. The porters led Otto Meissner past these low yellow windows with many sections. The damp foliage in front of them was flooded with an emerald light.

Eventually they arrived at a tall gate. The woman pressed her nose to the wicket and started beating with her fist. There was a bang in the yard, a door in the house opened, radiant with the light that streamed out, and the first

thing the traveller thought he heard was women weeping and lamenting. But a second later all was quiet and someone shuffled across the yard, stopping at the gate. A man's voice asked a question, and the woman replied. The wicket opened—and the traveller was led into the house.

Otto Meissner stood in a small room with a low ceiling covered with coloured, patterned paper. The room was almost empty, except for the rush mat which covered the whole floor and a pile of brightly coloured quilts in the corner. On the wall by the entrance hung a kerosene lamp with a carefully cleaned glass. Above it on the ceiling was a ring of soot. And, standing by this lamp, the swarthy-faced, grey-haired master of the house was reading Opoelov's letter, his eyes darting over the paper and looking up at the same time to examine his night visitor. When he had finished reading, he bowed his head in greeting, revealing the silvery bristles on the closely shaved scalp, and then backed out of the room.

The Master was left alone, not knowing what to do, but assuming that his host would return soon and bring him at least a chair. Time passed, however, and no one appeared. So Otto Meissner went up to the window, in which the top two rows had panes of glass and were not papered over like the lower panels. The lamplight shone through the window onto the dense, wet foliage of a bush. The rain was dripping down the shining leaves—from leaf to leaf—making them quiver like live things. Gazing into the mysterious, shining depths of the bush, Otto Meissner felt a strange excitement, as if he had accidentally peered into the secret of the surrounding universe, into the damp womb of the night enveloping half the globe. He could hear some kind of night life going on in the house, people performing purposeful movements, knocking something, conversing in hollow, subdued voices. But some special sense told Otto Meissner that these nocturnal sounds bore no relation to him. He seemed to have been completely forgotten. And so the philosopher decided to arrange himself here as he thought fit, like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. He had just begun to unpack the large bundle with his travelling equipment, when into the room slipped a young woman in a long skirt and short, tight-fitting bodice, barely down to her armpits, with

long sleeves. She walked noiselessly up to the pile of brightly coloured quilts and, kneeling down, began to make up a bed for the visitor on the floor. She was thin and unattractive, with a dull sallow face and small, unwelcoming eyes. Without turning her grimly concentrated face towards the newcomer, she spread out the quilts, tapped the oblong pillow lightly with her hand as if to shake the dust off it, then left the room immediately. Otto Meissner shrugged his shoulders, smiled and went on unpacking his bundle. He got out the camp-bed and two soft Scottish travelling rugs and made up his bed at a respectful, but fairly independent distance from the none too welcoming one prepared for him. Then the philosopher rapidly removed his wet clothing and donned a dry sleeping suit. Before getting into bed, he went up to the lamp, stood on tiptoe and blew into the circular opening that emitted a cloud of kerosene fumes. The light went out, and Otto Meissner, staring into the darkness with unseeing, as if suddenly vacant, eyes groped his way to the bed. Settling down in the bedclothes, he smiled as he pictured for a moment the grey-moustached, granite face of his far-off grandfather, whom he bade good-night.

## 2

The next morning Otto Meissner awoke feeling hungry, young and active, put on a striped Bokhara dressing gown and, after laying out his equipment on the windowsill, began to shave. He rubbed some wet soap on his chin and, looking in the small mirror, proceeded to remove the bristle carefully with a razor, collecting the soapy shavings on a piece of paper. Suddenly the unwelcoming girl of yesterday entered without a knock or a murmur. Silently she placed next to the mirror a thick glass jug of water and a small polished copper bowl. The philosopher, who had his tongue in his cheek, gave her a friendly squint over the razor, but the girl left without even looking round, her cloth slippers flapping over the floor. He finished shaving his long, youthful face, leaned over the bowl and carefully rinsed himself with water from the jug. The water was warm and clean. There

was quite a lot of it left after he had washed, so Otto Meissner decided to make himself some coffee.

He unpacked and set up his travelling spirit-lamp, lit it and placed a small silver coffee pot that made two cups on the flame. The water soon boiled, the Master measured out the usual amount of brown powder, shook it into the pot, and the room was instantly filled with a delicious aroma. Ripened in the hot, tropical sun, and then roasted on a fire, coffee beans always reminded Otto Meissner of crowds of swarthy-skinned people and their mysterious, fascinating life under hot skies. In his travels he had seen such people and such scorching skies above the plantations of Ceylon. But knowledge of coffee growing was one thing, and the dark, burnished, coffee-like froth, the poetic emanation from the morning smell of coffee, was quite another. Smiling as he reflected on this, the Master proceeded to unpack the basket put in his capacious travelling bag by kind-hearted, anxious Frau Opoelova with Flemish rosy cheeks on her creamy skin. The supplies which the generous merchant's wife had packed in the basket would have lasted the philosopher, who ate very little, for a whole month. Now, mentally kissing her plump, white hands, Otto Meissner spread a black layer of shining pressed caviare on a slice of bun.

During his solitary and meditative breakfast the Master was visited by his grey-headed host, and Otto Meissner, who had almost forgotten about the latter's existence, gazed at him enquiringly. The merchant knelt by the visitor's camp-bed and cast down his eyes respectfully. Suddenly he began to mutter something, bowing confusedly from the waist. From his fairly lengthy speech in not very correct Russian the Master learned with some difficulty that there was misfortune in the house. The merchant's younger daughter was gravely ill. Various doctors had seen her, a Chinese physician, a Korean doctor, and a Russian doctor's assistant from the next village. They had done all they could, but the girl was no better, and anything might happen. The merchant spread out his hands in despair. He apologised for the fact that this great misfortune had prevented him from giving a proper welcome to the visitor for whose sake Opoelov had written a letter in his own hand. But begged his guest to be patient,

Everything would be done as Opoelov had ordred. The merchant again bowed his grey head deferentially. It was obvious that he was completely at a loss, overwhelmed by grief and barely in control of himself. His red, swollen eyes kept filling with tears, which did not flow, however, but seemed to be boiling inside their receptacle.

A great deal now became clear to Otto Meissner: the unintentional neglect of him, the nocturnal noises, the first sound, the women's lamenting that he had heard when the door opened in the darkness, and the unsociable silence of the thin girl who, it turned out, was the elder sister of the merchant's sick daughter. The Master maintained a sympathetic silence as he sat opposite his host. The row of glass panes at the top of the window was now a brilliant blue after the dark wet night and, looking at this bright strip of azure, Otto Meissner wondered what he should do if this was the state of affairs. And came to the conclusion that it was not for him to decide, let the merchant work it out, and he would agree to anything he suggested. The merchant sat for a while in numb silence, then sighed and crept out of the room.

A little later he stuck his grey head round the door again, muttering something from the threshold. Suddenly he asked the visitor if he had a cup of coffee. When the Master had grasped the meaning of the request, he stretched out a hand in amazement to the window-sill, which served him as a table. He tipped the coffee-pot over a cup, but all that came out of the spout was a drop of grouty liquid that spurted over the white edges of the cup. Otto Meissner smiled regretfully at the merchant. The latter behaved in a most incomprehensible fashion: he looked away desperately, pressed his fat lips together and began to shake with uncontrollable sobs. The tears finally gushed from his eyes, and the merchant retired hastily without wiping them. The young philosopher felt a great agitation and heaviness of heart, as if he had just emerged from a mesmerized sleep. The reality that he perceived seemed strange and blurred, doubly strange and indeterminate because he had the feeling that this had already happened to him: an Oriental old man sitting by a doorway had wept before him, he had been holding a small silver coffee-pot, and the inaccessible blue in the glass of the window shone brightly, while

the rest of the wide frame was covered with matt paper. And he, the contemplator of this strange picture, the different parts of which had been joined by chance, not by any vital, intrinsic connection, had already experienced the alienation of death—that alienation which is the price for the acceptance by the living of themselves and the surrounding world. And now the most important thing for him, Otto Meissner, was to happen, but exactly what he could not say...

Without trying to strain his memory and will our philosopher poured the coffee grouts into the copper bowl, rinsed out the coffee-pot, filled it with water again, and placed it on the spirit-lamp. While the water was warming up, imprisoned in the silver vessel and enveloped by the irresistible heat of the blue flame, there took place in Otto Meissner himself and in the world around him the changes which gave rise to this unusual story: the water warming in the coffee-pot began to move, beadlike streams of tiny bubbles rising in it, Otto Meissner rinsed out his china cup, and in the next room death, which was hovering over the soul of the eighteen-year-old girl, suddenly shuddered and froze, her bony fingers ceasing to weave their choking web. The noseless one imagined that the huntress Love, her shameless, insolent rival, was stealing up to snatch her prey.

About a fortnight ago, the merchant's younger daughter, who had been christened Olga in the Orthodox faith, washed her hair and stood in the sun by the window drying the raven locks that fell to her ankles. An invisible and treacherous draught pierced her, and she fell ill. The girl's stricken body was racked with fever. Suddenly, a week later, there was a sinister, incomprehensible lull. The sick girl's delirious world no longer contained the terrible, hard-stoned hell, which alternated with airy filaments of sickly languor, nor the four brown, half-naked warriors with spears in their hands, who, in single file, following in one another's footsteps, either advanced on her menacingly, looming up to the sky, or retreated to the far horizon, shrinking to such small dimensions that it was tedious and pointless to watch them. And it became incredibly flat and empty in that expanse to which sickness had borne her, and all desire dried up in the soul.

But suddenly this morning, when a deep blue wedge of

sky visible through a crack in the shuttered window was boring pitilessly into her eyes, the sick girl suddenly smelt an unfamiliar aroma, strong and delicious. She closed her weak eyelids and concentrated with all her strength on this new sensation. The longer she lay, the more strongly the unknown scent attracted her. When her elder sister came into the room, the sick girl spoke for the first time in several days.

"What ... is ... that?" she asked quietly, barely able to sustain the weight of each word.

Her sister did not reply, only frowned, wrinkling her thin face, and burst out crying awkwardly.

"Where is ... that smell from?" the younger girl persisted. "I can't ... understand."

The elder sister took the sick girl's words for the delirium of a dying person, and sobbed bitterly, biting her hand.

"Silly," said Olga distinctly. "Go ... and bring ... the thing ... that smells. I want ... to eat it..."

"Father!" howled her sister, starting up like a broody hen. "She wants something to eat!" And crazy with joy, she rushed out of the room.

She ran to her mother in the kitchen, emitting triumphant howls of delight. The old woman did not understand and began wailing incoherently, sitting by the stove. The girl gave up in dismay, and ran into the yard up to the well where her father, his head between his hands, was sitting on a flat stone. He listened patiently to his daughter, but remained completely unmoved. The merchant knew what coffee was, the black, bitter beverage of rich Russians, and so did not attach any importance to the sick girl's wish: the most miraculous remedies had not helped, so how could a mouthful of that muck do any good... But the ugly daughter persisted, begging her father to ask the foreigner for at least a saucerful of the drink. She, who had spent her life with concealed longing and unfulfilled desire, sensed more clearly than many the proximity of that silence—otherwordly and impassive—that reigns in silent, human cemeteries. And she alone had understood her ailing sister's ravings about the four advancing warriors with spears. Not wishing to abandon her beautiful sister to these servants of death, the poor ugly girl was ready to cast her own wretched life before them,

like a bone to dogs, but they did not want such a substitute. She understood that her sister was perishing because she had suddenly and unexpectedly realised how tedious this fragile life is, seen its frailty and burning emptiness. And, having discovered that her ailing sister possessed this knowledge, the elder girl realised with horror that she might lose her one and only darling forever. She would be given up to the earth—and her elder sister would no longer be able to comb and dress the rich tresses or sew her silken dresses with love and trepidation... Thus she had thought, then suddenly hope sprang up, like a swallow soaring into the blue sky, but no one except the poor ugly sister could hear the joyful song of this hope. And she fell to the ground by her father, her head touching his knees. The old man stretched out a trembling hand and stroked her dull, uncombed hair, amazed at the strength and purity of a sister's love. And only because of her, his unfortunate elder daughter, did he get up shortly and go into the house—to make a request to the foreigner who had arrived so inopportunely...

Not having received what he requested, however, the old man forgot about it instantly and went to the sick girl's room. He saw his daughter's face thrown back on the pillow, fading away like an ailing crescent moon in the morning sky. And, falling by her bedside, the merchant gave vent openly to his grief, unconcerned that his sobbing might upset the sick girl. The elder daughter came in after him and gave him a beseeching look, but he was deaf to anything but his mortal anguish. Closing his eyes, he tried to understand the final parting of lovers beside which all else pales into insignificance. And at that moment Otto Meissner entered the room.

The young German in his striped Bokhara dressing gown appeared in the doorway, as if on the threshold of life with which the sick girl had lost almost all connection. The girl saw the coppery-red curls framing Otto Meissner's lean face, the calm, grey eyes in which one instantly sensed a secret, helpless and proud goodness. In his slightly outstretched hands he was holding a steaming coffeepot in one and a white china cup in the other.

At first the philosopher saw only the loose black hair cast to one side of the bed, thick and incredibly long hair, which seemed to be far more abundant than the frail,

prostrate body. The young man even shuddered fearfully: he imagined this powerful, shining stream of hair not as a natural adornment to female beauty, but as a black beast creeping up to the girl's translucent face. But a moment later he saw the girl herself: the mournfully raised brows and still eyes staring resignedly at the ceiling. The weak, slender neck and bosom were pitifully and carelessly exposed to view, but Otto Meissner did not avert his gaze, for he already kept in his heart a marital calmness at the sight of her body (prophetic insight is sometimes far ahead of experience), and we know that from his love of this body Otto Meissner received his continuation, a long branch of the Meissner family, extending far in time and space, the fruit of which was that Korean families with this German surname (now written Mesner) occasionally produce children with fiery red hair. Whereas Koreans usually have black hair, as we know. But, without trying to anticipate what is to come we would remind ourselves once more that, summoned up from non-existence to perform all that he is now performing before us, this Man of our imagination and brotherly yearning for him is merely an approximate and conventional impression. And who, who will deny that every dear person remembered is but a part of our spirit, our dream, the graven image of our intentions? Moreover we cannot omit a certain amount of primordial grief, for we know full well that the more lifelike the spectre of our reminiscences appears to us, the worse for us, the more painful our loss. And we ourselves, who still occupy a certain portion of three-dimensional space, are already someone else's reminiscences, in which, alas, there will be very little of the real us. And if we are woken one May morning by the close and furious sounds of the nightingale's song and go into the cool thickness of morning, into the silence with the nightingale's deafening ring, we may suddenly remember ourselves in an inexplicable way—and realise in mute grief, rapture and reconciliation how little the common memory retains and how priceless that little is.

And then it will be clear that the man, who had a soul, will remain in the world not as what he is, but as a kind of instant, bright reflection of himself like the flash of a shot on the far side of a broad field at night. The little

ball of fire exploded and went out, the thunder of the shot rolled over the dark fields, and silence fell again—and he who saw and heard this can now imagine anything he likes. A marvellous creature with three pairs of white wings, like three swans merged into one, flying over the black forests. In its hands the strange creature held a gun with the barrel pointing downwards and still smoking. Below was a quiet village with golden lights at windows clinging timidly to the ground. Someone went from the yard into the dark lobby of a log cabin, banging the door. The lid of a churn clanged. And the six-winged swan flying over the night forest disappeared instantly. The expanse of the imagination collapsed and changed shape. Its swirling darkness was pierced by a song chanted by carefree, maidens' voices:

*Oh, a terrible thing has beset us,*
*Fear takes away your breath.*
*For a stranger, a lad so reckless,*
*Has shot himself to death.*

And we imagine the "stranger" who shot himself in the night field — all that can be seen of him are his oustretched legs and muddy boots, only these legs, the tops of the dark, thin blades of grass and the golden crescent of the distant moon behind them. The song no longer rings within me. I long for the coming of noble words joined in an unusual order that will help me determine at last the true bounds of my spiritual essence. I am one of the descendants of Otto Meissner, Master of Philosophy of Königsberg University, and I have fiery red hair. I see the flash of the shot on the far edge of the night field. And after that I imagine my legendary *Glossvater* striding majestically over the heavens amid the night stars. I am grateful to him for the warm breath that quivers now in my nostrils, and for the eternal stamp of mystery on the whole aspect of the world given to me by him and for the cockerel colour of my hair. But such gratitude is too common and simple. I long to discover the most secret thing passed on in invisible ways from ancestor to descendant, and to grow in my outstretched hands a drop, as big as a melon, of the fire which runs eternally through human

hearts, like flame along branches. And I see the world of men like a vast swarm of self-propelled torches.

Let us not forget that all that is happening to us now has already happened before! The flame of human hope, goodness and love is always the same—as are the smoke of disquiet, the black coal of unspent passion, and the cold ash of self-oblivion. Only the flames of the universal fire run along more and more new branches, abundantly nurtured by the damp earth of life. And man can know everything about himself in advance, and the experience of many—those who have disappeared back into time—is imprinted on his brain, like honey in a comb; and the time will come when he too will taste the fragrant bitterness of old honey—and true insight into fate and death will illumine his sober mind. But if women have brought him up to be pure, and men have given him honour and strength, then true love, which is always the only one, is bound to come to him. And so Otto Meissner, who is now, let us say, pouring coffee into a white cup, may at this moment foresee in a flash everything that is to happen in the not too distant future between him and the Korean girl prostrate on her sick bed. But for the moment he is squatting on his heels, pouring a thin stream of black coffee into the china cup placed on the floor.

## 3

Whether it was because of that cup of coffee, which the girl suddenly craved at a perhaps chance and fleeting moment, but which she received at exactly the right time, or for another, more profound and mysterious reason, the sick girl soon began to take an interest in life again and ask for food, and in a few days she began to recover rapidly. The happy merchant Panteleimon Tian could now show to the full his cordiality and zeal in relation to the foreign guest.

It was midsummer and the weather was hot and clear. Each day the merchant and Otto Meissner went off in the morning to the poppy fields, where the incising of the heads had already begun. The old man explained to Otto Meissner how important it was to incise the juicy poppy fruits correctly in order to obtain the maximum amount

of opium juice from the fresh cut. They usually made fifteen incisions on a single head in a poppy's working life, but with a certain amount of skill one could find place for a sixteenth one also. Beaming proudly the sunburnt grey-haired merchant showed how this was done. He was sharing the simple secret of his present affluence with great generosity, while the Master wiped his perspiring face with a handkerchief and gazed absently at the old man's small, brown hands moving dexterously round the dull-green poppy head and inflicting the irremediable wounds with a small curved knife. Otto Meissner was reflecting on the kinship of all living things that take in air and water, with red or green blood; their kinship and mutual destruction for the further advance of life. "And I," thought the philosopher, "what place do I, Master Otto Meissner, occupy in this cycle of death and rebirth?" Cruelty is always avenged by cruelty: the Master thought of the consumers of this poppy blood, the weak, hideous opium smokers in a Hong Kong den which he had visited out of curiosity.

Returning one day from the poppy field, he was sitting in the yard on a warm stone by the well, fanning his sunburnt face with his hat. It was very hot and quiet. Otto Meissner calculated that he had been staying with the merchant for about two weeks. It was time to leave. A swallow flew in at the gate, zigzagging low over the ground, then soared up to reveal for an instant its blood-red neck. Everything here was alien to Otto Meissner. Suddenly he noticed a ball of red wool in the grass, not far from his feet. It could have been dropped by the swallow that had flashed past: the patch on its throat and this wool were exactly the same colour... He bent down and stretched out a hand to pick it up, but the ball jerked and rolled away. Then a girl's quick, lilting laughter rang out above him. The philosopher straightened up and saw a curtain move in an open window and above it, against the darkness of the room, the pale semi-oval of a woman's face with narrowed eyes and slender brows quivering with suppressed laughter. Otto Meissner recognised Olga, the merchant's younger daughter, smiled cordially at her and placed his hat on his chest, finding this the most dignified thing to do in the circumstances. The girl disappeared, but in another window the master caught sight

of her sister with a mocking smile on her thin, sallow face. Otto Meissner bowed lightly to her and retired from the yard to his room.

Another time, when he was lying on his camp-bed looking round, gazing vacantly at the patterned ceiling, a mouse-like scrabbling attracted his attention and Otto Meissner saw that a piece of straw had been poked through a small hole at the bottom of the paper door and was being twisted round. He immediately closed his eyes and pretended to be dozing. Suppressing a smile with difficulty, he recalled that there had been no hole in the door that morning. Soon the mouse-like noises stopped, and, opening his eyes slightly the master saw the yellow piece of straw lying on the threshold. The mouse had evidently become bored with its vain attempt to tease him and ran off quietly, after pushing the straw into the room.

That night Otto Meissner lay awake for a long time, then fell asleep and dreamed about something that will be, that has been, and that will remain forever outside time: a nightingale's song on a quiet May morning, when it was still night by the clock, but the pearly crown of the dawn was already rising high over the village, over the straw roofs and grey globes of quiet willows. Husband and wife lay, their naked bodies merged, as if transformed by the lightning of their passion into a single flowing stream, now cool, now hot, now silently tired, without movement or swell. The passion in them slumbered, but not they themselves—the husband and wife had woken at the same time to the nightingale's trilling at the open window, and were now listening silently to the bird's song. At this hour they were their own keen, omniscient prophets, judges and stern executioners of their own sentence on themselves. Occasionally the nightingale suddenly abandoned its mysterious warbling and clacked like a single, vibrant castanet, and these short, sharp clacks sounded like hurried kisses. Yes, the small, happy warbler, who had been granted the gift of life and song, was joyfully kissing the fiery deity rising over the cool quiet earth. Seeing the sun before him, the resonant herald of morning also found himself inside it, for the light radiating from the deity extolled by the singer was also the sun's body—like the air, which he drank in hastily, pouring his

music into it. Those who have loved know love's great secret: it exhausts itself in the inordinate bliss of fulfilment and afterwards it seems that only death remains for the two lovers. But then an invisible third builder of love appears out of the mysterious emptiness of the future, so like the past, and stands close, naked and tall, his being linking heaven and earth, decay and flowering, light and cosmic darkness. And I am proof of this, I, the red-headed grandson of Otto Meissner, and he knows it. It has been fulfilled, he thinks with relief, listening to the nightingale's song. It is as if he had always known about this inevitable fulfilment and was therefore able to act so confidently in all his manifestations of kindness, generosity and selflessness.

No one would probably dare to claim that he saw or heard the declarations of his grandfather and grandmother when the time came for them to fall in love with each other. Nor shall we. Let us say simply that Otto Meissner saw this declaration in a dream. A slender, curved bridge spanned the leaden waters of the Styx, at the beginning of the twentieth century of our great era. It was on this bridge that the Master of Philosophy met Olga and heard an old man's hollow cough in the river mist below. That was Charon with no work to do, moping gloomily in his boat. The new century, fraught with world wars, would have such a massive movement of souls to the kingdom of Hades, that a faster means of ferrying than his miserable little craft would be required. Olga was wearing European dress, a long, splendid crinoline, like the one in the portrait of his departed mother, and the Master realised in his sleep that the young girl had chosen this dress in order to look more familiar and dearer to him. They met in the middle of the bridge, as yet deserted, at the highest point of its smooth curve, and Olga spoke first:

"I have summoned you for a most important conversation, Otto. You came to me on the day and hour when I was preparing to depart from life, and it was only your hand that kept me in the world. Therefore from now onwards I must belong to you forever. So let us go where you will, and I shall always be at your side."

To which Otto Meissner replied:

"But, dear Olga, why do you not wish even to know

whether I love you or not before entrusting yourself to me?"

"Why should I ask when I already know all?" the girl replied simply.

"You are delight! Perfection!" the Master of Philosophy exclaimed. "But what, may I ask, am I to do now, my dear?"

"Take me to be your wife, and I will leave with you," came the reply.

"But what about your father? Your mother? And your relatives? Your people?" asked Otto Meissner quietly.

"I no longer belong to my parents or my people," came the reply. "I would have died anyway. But it turned out that I am needed by you... Do you not know this yourself? The very first sip of the coffee that you brought me revealed everything to me. And I agreed to live for you."

"Oh, how grateful I am to you, although this is incomprehensible and fantastic, like your fairy tales and philosophy. But listen, my divine one, I must reveal myself fully to you so that you may know in advance what you are choosing for yourself. You see before you the most lonely man in the world. Without any of the definite aims that drive those who seek self-assertion. I have lived little as yet but studied sufficiently, and all the knowledge which I have acquired has left nothing but doubt in me. In Königsberg I visited the grave of the great magician of abstract thought and realised one day that his tomb was a memorial not to the greatness of a triumphant sage, but to man's pathetic smallness. In Arabia I saw a Kurd slave being executed: his three executioners beat him with sticks until he died before everybody's eyes. In Tibet I lived in a Lama monastery and wished to embrace their faith and become a monk, but on closer aquaintance I realised that shaven-headed, bare-armed lamas are only ordinary people after all, who fear their superiors, love money and quarrel over trifles. It is the same everywhere, Olga, everywhere. Man in the form in which he exists—two arms, two legs and a round head—is too burdened down by his entrails, his spirit is captive to them. I have travelled round half the world and can now say that all human affairs revolve round a piece of bread, nothing else. True, some picture this piece as a mountain, and will not be satisfied with less, but that is madness, my dear.

My grandfather Friedrich Meissner, who is descended from a long line of Hanseatic merchants, has spent all his life turning the millstone of the capital he inherited, and there are people toiling away all over the world so that he can grow a bit richer. He is a kind of artist, a bold experimenter, forever investing his money in grandiose and original enterprises, like the Panama Canal, the African diamond trade or opium growing on the Russian bank of the Amur. But how I pity him, Olga! He naively believes that I will return from my travels and gradually take control of all the levers of his commercial machine while he, the old lion Friedrich, retires peacefully to his villa in Koblenz and follows at a distance the triumphal successes of his learned grandson. Oh, poor grandfather, he is plagued by angina pectoris, headaches, and lumbago, and he loves me, as obviously no one should love another. For such love always contains the seed of defeat, my dearest. And Friedrich Meissner, the powerful man of business, will experience this defeat because I, his only grandson and heir, shall never return to him."

"But why don't you want to return to him, Otto?" the girl asked reproachfully. "Aren't you sorry for him?"

"I did not say that I don't want to return," the Master replied to her in his dream. "I said that I *shall not be able* to return."

"How can you know that?"

"Sweet Olga, my wife and my widow, do you not know yourself how it will end?"

"No! You should not talk like that! I know nothing and do not wish to know. I am only a woman. My job is to be a good wife to you, Otto."

"Well, then... Let it be as you wish, my wise little Olga. I shall take you to a place we shall never reach, but even if we do not reach our goal, we shall have a long journey, and that is also something! But what shall I do *now*, Olga? Your father would rather die than give you up... Should we run away as we are going to do in a few days' time? Oh, if you only knew how I hate to inflict such a blow on the fine old man!"

"We must run away, Otto. There is nothing else for it."

And in reality they discussed in detail when and how to run away. According to his grandfather's instructions Otto Meissner was to go west to Chita and then on to Ir-

kutsk and Lake Baikal to study local methods of catching omul and estimate roughly the cost of securing a monopoly on trade in this rare fish. In order to carry out this part of his journey he would first have to take a boat up river. The Master and Olga agreed that she should go to a large village down the Amur ostensibly to visit relations, and then secretly board the boat that had brought Otto Meissner there: it was scheduled to arrive there from the lower reaches soon. The Master gave Olga a letter for his acquaintance, the mate Nefedov, requesting his assistance. The mate was to hide Olga, so that no one on the boat saw her. When the boat was about to arrive Otto Meissner would bid farewell to the merchant and join Olga on board.

And this is what happened. Good fortune smiled upon the fugitive couple. One bright moonlit night Otto Meissner was met at the gang-plank by Nefedov in a white peaked cap. The mate grasped his hand in warm sympathy, then led the way with a secretive and meaningful expression, swaying slightly on his bandy legs. He pushed the Master into a cabin, closing the door from the outside, carefully and tactfully. On the table was a candle holder with four candles, and in a chair in the corner sat the frightened Olga. She wore a long Korean skirt and short lilac jacket with a large bow on the front. She rose quickly and ran soundlessly up to him. He embraced her gently and kissed her. This was the first kiss of their love, a short and anxious one. Then Olga gave a deep sigh of relief and wiped her wet eyes with the end of her ribbon. Wishing to take a farewell look at her native shore, she went up to the cabin window and pulled back the curtain. At once she uttered a loud cry, covering her face with her arm. Opposite her stood her elder sister pressed against the window outside. Her thin face, crossed by the slanting beams of light falling through the uneven glass, was white and motionless, like a ghost's.

Olga ran out of the cabin. The boat had already cast off and was moving slowly along the bank, its wheels splashing like a water mill. By the rail stood the motionless figure of the mate, gazing pensively at the lapping, moonlit water. Hearing the door open, he turned quickly, his teeth flashing in a smile, and was about to say something. Olga rushed past round the corner of the deckhouse, but her sister's grey shadow flashed away towards the stern,

Olga called to her loudly and tearfully, but her sister did not reply. She was standing on the very edge of the boat. It was only then that Nefedov noticed her. Seeing another girl evidently connected in some way with this romantic story, the young mate moved towards her, in vague hope. Without waiting for him, she tucked up her long skirt with one hand and jumped silently into the water, legs pressed together.

"Man overboard!" shouted Nefedov, pulling off his naval jacket in order to jump after the girl.

But Olga ran up and put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Quiet. There's no need," she said. "It's my sister. She can swim like a fish."

No one ever knew how her sister had found out—what second sense had warned her—about their plan to run away. She beat the water with sharp, strong strokes, clearly visible in the moonlit path left by the boat. Black cascades of spray rose from her moving legs, her skirt billowed, and the swimming girl looked like a huge turtle gamboling in the moonlight. When she was a long way off, she suddenly cried out in a plaintive, wild, breaking voice:

"You will come back to me, Olga! Remember, you will come back to me! You'll see!"

And today we, the adult members of the Meissner family, know that this Cassandra's prophecy came true. Many years later a grey-haired, unrecognisable Olga returned to her village, with her two red-headed sons. And her aged sister, who lived alone without father or mother, helped with grim indifference to bring up her nephews. By that time she seemed dumb, because of her dislike of words, and looked like a strong, skinny old woman, her appearance remaining unchanged right up to real old age. When her red-headed nephews grew up and the family tree of each was blessed a young, happy progeny, she helped to bring up the new generation with the same grim indifference. And it was in Kazakhstan, where the descendants of Otto Meissner settled with other Koreans, that the mute Cassandra died one day, her face still set in the same unsociable, gloomy expression. What she carried away in her dry bosom, what love or hate, will never be known.

## 4

On the second day of their flight Otto Meissner and the girl left the boat at the first big village with a church. The Master did not wish to travel with a woman who was not his wife for all to see. Even the friendly jokes, congratulations and high-spirited attention of the boat's crew grated upon him. Moreover Olga was worried by something and wept all the time. Alighting on the unknown shore towards evening, the Master felt relief. The young couple picked up their belongings and set off for the church.

It was deserted by the wooden church with a copper dome. The porch was empty and a large padlock hung on the door. But in the corner of the large churchyard stood a sturdy log cabin which obviously belonged to the priest, with a brown, hornless calf tethered miserably on a long rope beside it. Leaving his bride-to-be in the porch, Otto Meissner went over to the cabin, passing the calf that was awakened from its drowsing and rushed off, kicking up its heels. At the Master's call a man with round spectacles and a thin, flat beard poked his head out of a barn. Wiping his hands on the hem of his old jacket, he walked up slowly, staring at the visitor in silent enquiry. Otto Meissner asked for the priest, and the man in the jacket replied that it was he, Father Konstantin. The Master removed his hat respectfully, bowed and made his request. The priest refused at once.

"It is quite impossible due to the lack of clarity in your position and the absence of witnesses. Where are your fathers and mothers?"

The Master then presented a document in the form of a credit note for a large sum of money and in return received a sideways glance and an embarrassed cough, which one could probably take as a sign of enforced consent. The simple priest then set off towards the church, pulling up the hem of his coat as he went to get the key from his trouser pocket. The brown calf rushed at him joyfully, but the priest jumped out of the way, pulled off his hat and waved it at the animal, shouting with exaggerated hatred:

"Little devil!"

Excited by the encounter with the calf, the priest walked past the girl in silence looking down as if he had not

noticed her. For a long time he could not open the lock, but eventually managed it and disappeared into the church, closing the door behind him. Otto Meissner went over and stood next to Olga. They both looked at the calf, which had got the rope caught in its hoof and was trying to shake it off, jerking its leg.

The young people waited a long time. Eventually the door opened and the priest's bespectacled head poked out.

"Come in," he invited them in a new, stern voice.

Letting the bridal pair pass, Father Konstantin fastened the church door from the inside with a hook. It was dark in the porch, but inside the church itself several candles and an icon-lamp were burning, their steady flames surrounded with a bleached, golden halo. The priest, who had already changed into his official robes to perform the ceremony, walked ahead of them. Standing on the dais, he motioned the young people who were waiting motionless in the middle of the church, to approach, and when they came up he examined each of them keenly and carefully.

"I see that you are both non-Russians," he pronounced finally, having completed his inspection. "You are of Korean origin, I see from your dress," he nodded at Olga, "And you, bridegroom in the hat, kindly tell me what is your faith?"

"I am a Christian, Holy Father," Otto Meissner replied, smiling.

"Then why are you taking a heathen wife?"

"I too have been christened," said Olga, "And my father also."

"Well, thank the Lord that you are both Christians. I will now consecrate your marriage without any pangs of conscience," Father Konstantin said with relief. "Now say your names clearly."

"Otto Meissner."

"Olga."

"Well, then, Otto Meissner and you, Olga," the priest began, "Listen, and I shall be brief. I see that your nuptials require haste and that your parents are not at your side. It is not my business to reason why. My business is to fulfil the will of God that brought you to the doors of this humble church. And I see, too, that the sacred feeling of love has joined you and that you are now being

persecuted for it, but do not renounce it, for it is true and sacred. And I believe that you will be one in spirit and in body and faithful unto each other, like Adam and Eve, until the end of your days on earth. And therefore we shall forget about the ritual, and I shall give you a simple blessing. Go now, live and work in the pasture of virtue, and I do hereby absolve you of all your former sins, if such there were, and henceforth there remains only the sanctity of lawful matrimony. Otto Meissner! Do you consent to take this bondmaid of the Lord, Olga, to be your wife?"

"I do, Holy Father."

"And you, Olga, do you consent to be a faithful wife to this bondsman of the Lord, Otto Meissner?"

"I do."

"Then Amen! Go with God. You are henceforth man and wife."

And having blessed them thrice, both together, with solemn sweeping signs of the cross, Father Konstantin went to the side chapel to take off his robes. His old, patched trousers for work around the house and his muddy, military-looking boots could be seen under his gold-embroidered priest's vestments. Otto Meissner left the church with his wife.

They came out of the churchyard and walked down to the village along a sloping path between the spreading bird cherry trees laden with black fruit. The log cabins on the bank of the Amur were dimly visible, lights shone in a few windows, and quiet evening smoke drifted over the chimneys and then melted away. Beyond the cabins the river glittered with a dull pink light, and high above it in a green sky the warlike sign of the crescent moon shone with a phosphorescent brilliance.

They had to find a bed and shelter until the next boat, which was due tomorrow. But the gates were already locked and the yards empty and silent. The timid newly-weds walked all round the village without meeting a soul. Then Otto Meissner smiled at his wife, took her by the hand and led her away.

They climbed up to a high spot, which dropped steeply on one side to the river. There was a good view of the whole village and the dark jetty nearby. An old apple tree was growing by the edge of the steep slope. Otto

Meissner resolved to set up camp under this tree. He unstrapped his bundle, got out the camp-bed, and set it up in the thick dewy grass, propping one side of it against the thick trunk of the apple tree. The tree was still radiating the noonday warmth. Having prepared the bed, he said to his wife affectionately:

"Sleep here, Olga, the air is wonderful."

"But what about you?" she asked worriedly.

"I shall keep watch over you, like a soldier," the Master replied drawing his wife quietly to him.

After he had helped her to settle down comfortably and tucked the cosy travelling rug round her, Otto Meissner sat on the edge of the bed and when his wife, whom he could no longer see in the twilight, became quiet and still, he got up and walked away softly. But an invisible thread of anxiety seemed to stretch after him. The Master could still make out the black, indistinct foliage of the tree, under which he sensed something with which his helpless, human anxiety would henceforth be linked forever. He came back, knelt down by the bed, and reached carefully for his wife's soft dry hair in the darkness. She grasped his hand in her hot palms and kissed it quickly. Otto Meissner said with feeling:

"Sleep, my dear. That which must happen and which is as meaningful and important to our god as our death and our birth will not take place here or now. All these mysteries are sacred, but love is the most sacred mystery of all, which is why we can be born or die in the presence of others, but love only in private. There are too many unnecessary witnesses now. See the river below. The water is covered with a cool mist, and in that mist lurk cunning mermaids, Olga. And see the moon watching us from on high, and next to it our golden-headed grandsons are hiding and watching us, pretending to be stars. They probably have no idea yet that they are our grandsons, but one day we shall grant them our keenest attention and lock them in our heart; and when they have lain there, maturing like chickens and begin threshing about to be let out, you and I will smile and release them... All this will come to pass, because the miracle, the divine miracle and great joy is that I love you, and this cannot be in vain. Sleep soundly ... but what do I hear? Are you laughing? Or crying?"

"No, I am laughing, Otto! Because I cannot understand why you are worrying. Hasn't everything already happened between you and me? You know, I feel as if we have already spent a whole life together, and everything has happened, and we could even tell each other about it..."

"Yes, Olga..."

"I'm tired. I will sleep now... Sleep now ... now," whispered my grandmother, not suspecting that in front of her stood the spectral object of our dream (as she herself was, incidentally) and that in pressing her friend's warm fingers in her hands, she was actually pressing emptiness which had temporarily assumed the form of a thin hand. "Good night, Otto."

"Good night!"

And fall asleep she did, lightly, as she sighed, and her soul became inaccessible to her husband who kept vigil. He sat, holding her hand and looking up through the apple tree branches into the dark blue well of the young summer night. The patch of blue was small and shaped like a sand-glass. And a golden star shone brightly in the lower half of this celestial, blue-glass clock.

"I am one of your grandsons," it proclaimed.

"Grandson..." said Otto Meissner, as if echoing his own thoughts. "Tell me, dear grandson, why did you summon me up, as spiritualists do, and send me off again along this path which I have already trod?"

"Forgive me, grandfather. It was probably wrong of me," his grandson repented. "But I think about you very much for some reason, and I wanted to see you. For you cannot love what you have never seen. So when I am sad and lonely I try to picture you, because I do love my grandfather after all."

"That's cunning, and smacks of sophistry," grinned Otto Meissner. "But it's very kind of you. Actually, although I shall never have the good fortune to gaze upon my grandsons and now see before me only a medium-sized ginger star, I love you, too, my sophist grandson. But one thing I beg of you: in reconstructing the story of your ancestors, try to stick to the facts and not to indulge in fantasy. For our poetic fantasies are far from harmless. They too may serve human falsehood and evil."

While Otto Meissner was having this friendly and instructive chat with the star, it moved from the lower to

the upper half of the sand-glass. The night world continued its silent, solemn procession.

"A man sometimes imagines, grandson, that his existence is a deep sleep and that what revolves around him is just a blue airy sphere, lightly illumined with hosts of strange lights. This may happen to him, if, say, he is alone at night unable to sleep and gazes through the window at the quiet Selene with the pale, protuberant forehead that is slightly clouded and bears traces of mysterious cares. An inexpressible sense of estrangement from the past comes over him, and he feels that he has never known the taste of an apple or a mother's kiss. And that perhaps he is a pale dolphin drowsing on the ocean waves. And all round him are huge, dancing mountains of water with the stars of the heavens plunging into their crests as they fly upwards. He stretches out his hands in a simple, involuntary movement, placing them in the moonlight, and sees his two pale palms gleaming faintly against the dark window-sill. And he thinks he is even more lonely than the dolphin on the waves. But do you hear my child? A dog barks in the village. It has put its tail between its legs and lifted its head to the moon. Its soul is gripped by the anguish of presentiment. Perhaps it senses that tomorrow its master will shoot it. And it is right. The knowledge of this sort possessed by irrational, intuitive creatures is remarkable, my friend! But a dog can never tell anyone else of its loneliness. Only man, endowed with a divine soul, is capable of understanding his anxiety and hence of understanding the anxiety of others. And this is why, we can confide in each other, my friend. I in you as you in me."

"Otto Meissner! I shall fully appreciate this noble quality of ours when it is my turn to plunge down to earth one day amid the falling stars of August and become a man. Oh, what wild excitement to know that you will be a man on earth! My whole stellar essence thrills with this excitement, and fiery fountains of prominences spray out from me in all directions. Just imagine! Yesterday there was no sign of you, and today you are sitting in a canteen drinking beer! 'Where have you come from, radiant guest,' they will ask me, 'and who placed that gold crown upon your brow?' What can I reply? 'Why bother to ask?' I shall say. 'Here I am. What more do

you want?' 'Everything is alright now,' I shall say, 'but I don't want to meet a certain little woman in this life, a blonde with pretty curls down to her shoulders. I don't want to love and lose her. I don't want to lie on a divan in the corner of a room behind some bookcases and hear her making love with someone else a few feet away. And I don't want to say later, as I pour beer into glasses with a serious air, that love does not exist, nor happiness, and all that has ever existed is selfishness, deceit and self-consolation.' "

"My dear boy! The life of a single person is but a line in the book of mankind. Perhaps even only half a line with dots at the end..." Otto Meissner began seriously, but then the star shining by the edge of a blue window, in the crown of the apple tree, slipped out of sight, and the Master rose and emerged from under the tree to continue the conversation with his golden-headed grandson.

But when he came into the open and looked up to the sky, he saw so many shimmering grains of fire that he could no longer distinguish his companion among them. The celestial mirror was a huge sphere reflecting, inter-alia, the Master of Philosophy's past and future. In the vaulted hemisphere of the night they looked like a remote glimmering speck of obscure mistiness. Perhaps the traces of all human destinies were reflected in this mirror, but the mirror itself still looked as it had to the first shepherd on the earth. The same stars and constellations, Vega, Cygnus, and the same faint murmur of the universe, produced by the moments of their birth, glimmering life and destruction. Otto Meissner looked down humbly and got out the second travelling rug. He decided to lie on the grass and gaze up at the familiar stars and planets.

Under the thick low crown of the apple tree the air had now grown cooler and denser than in the open space which was warmed by the reflection of so many lights—or was he imagining it? But he regretted not having chosen a spot in the grass for his wife's bed.

He settled down on the ground, tucking one corner of the rug under him. From the river, whose waters and nocturnal life could be sensed in the distance from the

muted lapping of waves on the shore and the distant splashing of fish, came a fresh breeze that drove away the mosquitoes and gnats. The Master lay on the dewy grass and stared up at the clear night sky, stretched out majestically before him. The crooked crescent moon had moved to the right of the Milky Way, and to the left of it were big stars, easily discernible in the cloudless night sky. Otto Meissner saw clearly that some heavenly cloudless bodies were much closer than others, and this revealed something new to him in the old picture of the night sky. For the first time the Master of Philosophy sensed the depth of the heavenly sphere. As in childhood, he began to count the stars, beginning with the misty edge of the Milky Way, but soon realised that he could not concentrate on this innocent pastime. His thoughts raced ahead to what was to come.

After reaching Baikal and obtaining all the necessary information about the omul, he was to bear left to Tuva, where he would meet the English manufacturer, Mr Joshua Stubbs, who owned a concession on the mining of local asbestos. There Otto Meissner was to find out whether the deposits of this mineral were so great and whether their fibres were twenty centimetres long. After the negotiations with Stubbs he could take the shortest route back to Europe and the Volga. Further instructions from his grandfather would be received in the town of V. from a corn chandler by the name of Harzheim... So they would have to sail on up the Amur as far as the railway, then travel along it, first as far as Chita...

While he was thinking about all this, the Master gazed at the sky's fiery countenance. He would close his eyes and dream quietly, then come to with a start, and marvel to find himself here on the ground in the wet grass, looking up at the sky, and remember that this was his wedding night and his wife was sleeping nearby under a tree. Then, smiling to the silent grass and stars, Otto Meissner wished he was the cool current of air that his wife was drawing into her breast to refresh her tired blood and return to the cool of the night in her warm, fragrant breath.

Suddenly he fell into a deep slumber, and his sleepy emotions mingled with the sound of the dew running off the grass, the lapping river, the night call of a lonely bit-

tern in a distant marsh, and a hare scurrying over a nearby mound and looking round, one ear flopping over its eye, in the direction of the black, silent apple tree. And Otto Meissner's dreams were soft as clouds, drifting and bright, primordially happy and sad at the same time.

He woke with difficulty towards morning at the touch of cold drops that were falling onto his face from the sedge bending over him. The grass around was covered with dew that shone with an inner light, like the piles of pink pearls he had seen on his visit to a pearl plantation in the Straits of Japan. Now they seemed to have been spilling out of the recesses of his memory, as he lay fast asleep on the ground. The high, now remote, edge of the misty sky, which was receding with dawn, also shone with ashen pinkish radiance.

Otto Meissner lifted his head from the ground, seized by the sudden fear, like a sentry who has fallen asleep at his post, and saw that his wife was asleep on the camp-bed, covered with the check travelling rug, only one pale hand faintly visible.

The sound of rhythmic splashing came from the river and, getting up, the Master saw a native Orochon in a boat. It was a very small boat, like a tub, and the man was rowing against the current, plying the short oars vigorously. He was dressed in a blue shirt fastened on one shoulder, and his head, covered with a white cloth to keep off the mosquitoes, was adorned by a flat hat with a bird's feather stuck in the crown. Catching sight of the man moving on the bank and the other person beside him, the rower stopped, pulling up his broad shoulders. For a while he remained transfixed, his dark face with heavy cheekbones turned towards the shore, and the current began to carry the boat backwards, so the man had to twist his neck more and more sharply to see the scene that had startled him. Then he recovered and dug in the oars, bending quickly and straightening up, and soon the boat and the oarsman disappeared behind the willow branches drooping low over the water.

Otto Meissner lay down again and wrapped himself in the rug, now covered with beads of dew on the outside, but snug inside. When he warmed up, the Master began to doze again. The last thing he noticed in the clear world of early morning, before plunging into a deep

sleep, was the outline of a distant hill swathed in mist at the foot. You could already make out dark patches of pines amid dense fleecy waves of greenery on the steep slopes.

Then the sun rose above the hill, growing stronger, and the sleeping man gradually felt warmer. The dew dried slowly on the hand shielding his eyes from the bright sun. Then it became really hot, and the Master tore himself away from his sweet, youthful dream and saw before him the pink, smiling face of his wife. She had already washed and combed her hair. Lying down beside him on the ground, Olga kissed him, and he felt the cold taste of river water on his lips.

## 5

In Chita the Master visited his grandfather's agent, a certain Herr Rieder, the owner of some fur trading stations, and was greeted most cordially. Rieder's son, a young merchant about the Master's age, who played the clarinet exquisitely, took a great liking to Otto Meissner, and admired his exotic wife. He did everything to ensure that the young couple's stay was enjoyable. Otto Meissner and Olga spent the best time of their life together in Chita. As soon as they arrived Olga was dressed in the most fashionable European clothes and introduced to the local merchants and industrialists, and she soon learned to waltz, to have her hand kissed, and to sit with bare shoulders among the peaceful flock of strange, well-educated gentlemen, in a word, to shine in high society.

The days and weeks sped by almost unnoticed, full of laughter, happiness, gaiety and the melodies of Glück and Chopin which the melancholy, gentle Rieder Junior played to them in the semi-darkness of a shuttered room. And by Christmas it transpired that this happiness had a special meaning for Olga, because as a result of it she was bearing another life within her. Happy, almost intoxicated, Otto Meissner now looked more carefree than ever before. He decided to stay in the town until the child was born and requested permission from his grandfather, to whom he finally related the whole story of his

unexpected marriage in the same letter. It was some time before the reply arrived in which Friedrich Meissner congratulated his grandson and the young wife with a stiff coolness. He went on to remind them that apart from personal happiness a man should not forget about his obligations and the thirst for knowledge that sometimes makes him set off on a long and difficult journey. Therefore, come what may, Otto Meissner should dispatch himself with the greatest speed to the town of Irkutsk, near to the Baikal omul, and also give serious thought to the journey to Tuva to visit Mr Joshua Stubbs. How his grandson decided to carry out the tasks entrusted to him was his affair, "but I trust that it will in no way affect the peace and welfare of my dear daughter-in-law", read the straight, neat lines of grandfather's missive. Towards the end of the letter a certain agitated unevenness appeared in the lines, as the old Meissner told his grandson that he had been compelled to cease his visits to the hospitable home of their mutual acquaintance Baron X, which had given him great pleasure, because he felt lonely when his grandson went away. "The fact is," he wrote, "that it was most pleasant for me to convey your greetings to my friend X, Baroness Sophia and the charming Ingrid..." Then in a very firm, bold hand he wrote that, naturally, a person was free to act as his conscience and reason dictated, and that money for the rest of the business journey would be transferred to the bank in Irkutsk...

It was in Irkutsk that Olga gave birth to her first child in the spring. Neither before the birth of his son nor after the event, did the Master have time to visit the Baikal omul fisheries. The complications of the birth, the illness of the child and the attendant worry and bustle required his constant presence by his wife's side, so the trade in this unusual fish remained entirely in the hands of local merchants in its former primitive and unsyndicated state. Which led Friedrich Meissner to write a letter from the other end of the world that read, in part, as follows:

"It is possible that I am already so old as to manifest a certain inflexibility in my principles of life. But precisely of this inflexibility of mine I continue to insist unswervingly that Action and Knowledge

are the most important things for a person. All the rest comes under the additional appendix of Destiny.

"Dear Otto, my only child, how happy I should be to embrace you at this moment. But by virtue of certain circumstances resulting, unfortunately, from your own decisions, I feel that the time of our meeting is being automatically postponed. You, Otto Meissner, will have to reconcile yourself to what I am, what God has made me. But He sees that I could not allow you to present yourself to me if you should take it into your head to desist from the performance of your duties. I am very pleased with your reports on Indian hemp, Japanese artificial pearls, and Commander Islands' seals. You also managed well enough with the assignment concerning Amur opium, and God grant that you may fulfil the rest of your mission as conscientiously. I trust you will soon disperse my doubts, for permit me to be frank— I have begun to doubt you... A person who shows no interest in Baikal omul may also be indifferent to long-fibred asbestos. But, trusting in Providence and hoping for the best, I do not wish to force you, just as I never have. That is not the way I brought you up. You are free to act as you think fit, proceeding only from the dictates of your heart and reason. Bear in mind, however, that I consider it totally illogical to dispatch someone else to Mr Stubbs, when my most trusted agent is practically next door to him. The samples of asbestos that the Englishman has shown me are most promising, but I should like to be quite sure about the size of the deposits, because the forty per cent that Stubbs is offering me in the business means two-and-a-half million in American dollars. To fail because of insufficient information in such an undertaking would be highly undesirable, as you yourself can see. So I am giving you the time and resources to put your private affairs in order, and for this purpose I am extending your business trip to the end of the current year 1913 and do not wish to see you until the year after, however painful this postponement is for me. By the way, during this time I shall, no doubt, manage to get used to the idea that I am a great-grandfather and the image of my dear daughter-in-law, of whom I shall now frequently think, shall occupy a fitting place in my heart. Such are our mortal dreams!

The child could pluck a star from heaven, but chooses a tin button instead. The latter bears no relation whatever to your beloved spouse, of course, for I know nothing of her virtues, and even less of her failings. You can tell her, if it is your custom to talk to her in any decent language of the civilised world, that I shall be pleased to make her acquaintance some day and that of my newly-born great-grandson, whose name I do not yet have the honour of knowing..."

Then followed the old man's private confessions about his state of health, his occasional high blood pressure, heart ache and pains in the back of the head and left arm. The letter finished with the traditional words of familial greeting. But in spite of all the perfectly ordinary forms and phrases of the epistle, the order to Otto Meissner not to appear until his grandfather's wrath had subsided, was delivered between the lines with an iron will. And to appease his Hanseatic spirit, his grandson was to carry out a business assignment, namely, to travel to Tuva and measure with a ruler the length of the fibres of the local asbestos, taking samples from deposits in different places.

So there now existed a document containing written confirmation on the Friedrich Meissner's eternal parting from his beloved grandson—and the old man had placed his large, sloping signature on it. It was 1913 with not long to go before the next year, in the summer of which Europe would be plunged into the flames of the First World War. Friedrich Meissner must have been feeling his age, if, next to the very cauldrons of the monstrous kitchen, he could not smell the dead bodies in the stew.

Not until the end of August was Otto Meissner able to set off for that remote, semi-wild Tuva. Olga did not wish to be parted from her husband and insisted that they should travel together. It was difficult for the Master to decide upon this journey. To set off with a babe-in-arms along thousands of versts of muddy roads, then over the Sayan mountains and on by horse and camel through the Khakass steppes and dusty Tuvinian deserts was illogical, particularly as the aim of the journey, to measure a kind of stone fringe with a ruler, seemed completely ridiculous to the philosopher. And

during the hot, stuffy days of waiting in Irkutsk Otto Meissner felt particularly alien in this strange land. But eventually they set off, and, picturing the journey that lay ahead, the Master would go rigid with anxiety.

For he knew that the line across this vast expanse that indicated their difficult path, beset by physical discomfort, constant spiritual unease, and the dull torpor of time spent travelling, that this line would probably remain on his geographical road map alone, nowhere else. No other trace remains from a person's resolute journeys round the world, unless he is an explorer and leaves a post behind him with something carved on it or a monument with his name on the pedestal. Otto Meissner saw no sense in his journey, and purposeless covering of distance leaves nothing behind it except an oppressive sensation of emptiness. Would it not be easier, he thought, to stay where they were and let the imagined space pass them by—for both the former and the latter mode of travelling would get them nowhere, and they could imagine the fatigue of travelling perfectly well if they remained in the seedy Irkutsk hotel.

And as he sat in the covered wagon he saw his mother in her coffin and recalled her death and funeral, his mother's still, white face, like a plaster mask, the stiff unfeeling arms, crossed like sticks on her chest, and everything on her—even her death robes, the ring on her finger, and the flowers in the coffin—was rigid with the estranged stillness of death. Only her hair, her thick, fine, lightly golden hair, was the same, alive, and an invisible draught touched and moved it in a terrible way, as if phantoms from another worlds were hovering round the dead woman... Otto Meissner opened his eyes to find that he had grown up long ago and was travelling along muddy autumn roads somewhere in the middle of the Genghis Khan steppe and the driver seemed to have stopped the horses to speak to someone, a tall, swarthy-complexioned native of those parts who was carrying a lamb over his shoulders, holding two thin legs in each hand. And the poor creature that was being carried either to its salvation or to the slaughter, lifted up its head, like all desperate things with long necks do, with pathetic hope... Its childlike eyes stared at Otto Meissner. "It's me, surely you recognise me?" they asked.

"Yes, I do. You are the helpless, meek and silent lamb delivered into the hands of the cruel priest. But do not ask me the meaning of this sacrifice, for I do not know," the Master of Philosophy replied silently, closing his eyes again. Next to him, her shoulder touching him, sat his wife holding their sleepy child.

And the Master remembered the port at Yokohama, the bright, well-dressed crowd at the quay, and the tangled tinsel of long paper ribbons stretching between the shore and the boat, which was slowly but surely moving away from the landing stage. The people on the shore and the passengers on board were holding opposite ends of these paper ribbons, and Otto Meissner, who was leaving Japan forever, which he had visited on his grandfather's instructions, gazed down at the crowd waving handkerchiefs and fans in farewell. Now and then paper streamers flew over it, forming a smooth arc in the air, then collapsing helplessly, like vain attempts to reach out and touch the loved one in the agonising moment of parting. The shouts, the waving fans, the nodding of the high coiffures in which Japanese women stick large hairpins like daggers... And suddenly an excited young man climbed onto a post, helped by his friends, took off his student's hat and, holding it in his outstretched hand, sang a farewell song in a magnificent voice.

Yes! Let us extol the beauty of flying paper streamers, thought Otto Meissner, the brief moment of their flight and then their smooth fall over the carnival of life. Let us extol this gentle, delicate bond that still exists between those who grasp with sad fingers the opposite ends of a paper ribbon, while the ship moves slowly away from the quayside, pulling the entangled tinsel rustling in the wind. Let us extol these narrow strips of paper stretched over the rubbish-filled water of the harbour, for they unite, until they snap, the silent despair of tears, the longing lips, the helpless desire for eternal reunion with the beloved... And the Master pressed closer to his wife, who was dozing as she bent resignedly over the child.

Having examined a multitude of philosophical and religious ideas in search of an extra-sensual refuge for his inconsolable intellect, Otto Meissner suddenly found himself linked with two creatures by such a powerful

bond of love and concern that all his former spontaneous inclination towards solipsism vanished like smoke. Now he could no longer assume if necessary that the world did not exist, and that it never had or would, no man who had received a wife from his bloody rib and a child from his love of her could allow himself such relief. Yes, now he had become far more vulnerable, for now there had appeared on the pulsating body of the Cosmos a bleeding spot, a tiny ulcer, which if touched would arouse fierce pain and anxiety in the philosopher's heart. Now he could not look on indifferently if anyone dared to lift a finger against Olga. He would probably give such a scoundrel a punch in the head.

Then the Master of Philosophy had a complex three-dimensional vision. First he saw the lamb again and its thin, childlike bleating pierced his heart anew. The lamb's eyes held the question of all questions: the creature wished to know why the scarlet, sacrificial blood would gush from its body and why an immense pain like the universe exploding would rise up in its throat where the steel blade pierced it. Then the philosopher saw an endless steppe, over which a flock of these lambs was being driven. Where, why? Perhaps they had been selected for the production of lambskin, thought the Master. The flock was driven away and the steppe was empty again. It was a dull, dusty grey, even and flat, with nothing to catch the eye. The word waterless, *wasserlos*, came into his head. The spreading veins of the earth's blood, water, did not penetrate these parts, and the contact of sun and earth produced nothing but a sterile heat that gave birth to dust and the deceptive mirages of the desert.

The Goodness of Mankind disperses in time into streams, rivers and quiet reservoirs and nourishes the coition of Man and the Sun, from which creation grows. But the boundless god of space has vast deserts without a drop of water, and the boundless god of time has had long periods without humanity or self-creativity. *Wasserlos*, waterless—when only the dust-storms of cruelty swept over the expanses of earthly time. And Otto Meissner choked at the very idea of contact with the hurricane blasts of savagery if only of the period of Mongol-Tartar supremacy, from which he was separated not by space

(for fate had cast him into the very heart of bellicose Asia!), but merely by the invisible veil of a few past centuries. And looking at the surrounding lifeless plains through this veil, the Master half-expected galloping hordes of Tartars on shaggy horses to appear out of them. But suddenly he saw a completely different scene: the same steppe was covered up to the flat horizon with frisking lambs. Were they the ghosts of lambs slaughtered and skinned who had now ceased to suffer and gained eternal bliss and immortality instead of suffering and death? Or had the philosopher seen this vision of countless happy sheep as a reminder that there had always been, even during Tartar-Mongol period, and would always be a carefree time for lambs, just as there was a time for their slaughter? Otto Meissner's heart ached with helpless fear for all the lambs gamboling on the green earth, and, most of all, for the two human beings with whom he had become indissolubly united through his love.

Nothing reveals this powerful bond through love like a moment of mortal danger. They were attacked by wolves. The animals leapt out of the silvery-white steppe of winter that overtook the travellers on their way to distant Tuva. The Meissners and their Khakass driver were travelling in a wide sledge loaded to the full. Olga was half-lying with her back to the driver, wrapped from head to foot in a huge white sheepskin coat which had been specially made in an Old Believers' village at her request and instructions. Inside this tent-like coat the mother could change and breast-feed her child. The Master had never seen wolves running wild before. For him they had always been *die Wölfen* out of fairy tales, dressed in ruffian's rags, with knives in their belt. So when their dirty brown, galloping forms appeared in the distance on the white plain, Otto Meissner mistook them for dogs and wondered where they could have come from in this deserted spot, far from all habitation. Then the Khakass driver caught sight of them. With a wild scream, he leapt to his feet and began whipping the horses frantically. They bolted off, and the driver lost his balance, falling back into his seat. Only then did the Master realise that the dogs chasing them were not dogs at all, and

with a chilled heart he understood their relentless pursuit. Hidden in her sheepskin tent, Olga had noticed nothing. Otto Meissner pulled out the chest from under the hay. Its iron lock, burning from the cold, stuck to his hand and would not open. When he eventually managed to open the chest and throw back the lid, a pile of writing paper was whipped out of it by the wind. The white sheets flew up into the air, whirling about behind the sledge, and the wolves, now very close, halted for a moment, startled by the strange birds bearing down on them. In the meantime Otto Meissner had managed to get out and prepare his revolver. The metal immediately stuck to his warm palm, pulling off the skin, but the Master did not notice the pain. Looking round for an instant, he saw that Olga had put her head out of the white collar of the sheepskin coat and was staring at the chase with round, horror-stricken eyes. The driver was shouting and lashing the horses, who were wading terribly slowly and clumsily through the snow. The Khakass put down the whip and pulled a long knife out of his belt. Olga fell face down on the sledge, covering the child with her body. The Master placed a hand on her shoulder and raised himself up a little, kneeling. The wolves were running abreast, the first one now right alongside them, three paces away from the back of the sledge. The others were trying to overtake the sledge, their eyes trained sideways on the horses. The first, his nostrils flared over his white, bared teeth, did not even glance at the people, but was obviously searching for a place where he could jump into the sledge. His slanting, yellow eyes were hard and intelligent. Otto Meissner pointed the hand with the revolver at him, almost sticking the barrel into his broad forehead, and fired the first shot. After the explosion the beast plunged into the snow, beating the air with its paws. The Master bent over his wife, lay down on the sheepskin coat and sent a wedge of fire roaring into the side of the second huge beast who was leaping madly at the horses. The bullet caught him as he jumped, and the wolf twisted in the air, its claws trying to find the place where death had entered its body. Otto Meissner's third shot broke the sacrum of a young, thickset wolf that had already overtaken the sledge and was running along with the horses, taking no notice of the

whistling lashes of the whip which the driver was aiming at him. When the bullet crushed the bones of its hind legs, it collapsed sideways in the snow, tried to drag itself forward with its front legs, then stopped and howled—and thus it remained, cursing and wailing to high heaven. The other wolves recoiled instantly and did not close their ranks, but spread further and further apart, thus demonstrating their confusion. Seeing this, the driver gave a howl of delight, shaking his raised fist. And the Master of Philosophy howled and laughed with him. He rose and embraced his wife, feeling an unknown gaiety rise within him. In his youth he had decided that there was nothing for him to do in a world where there was no place for reason and that he should go into a monastery, but now he had suddenly tasted the warrior's joy of victory. The victory was certain, for there were still many bullets left in the revolver, but the grey bandits did not dare to attack now. They were still racing over the steppe in time with the horses, as if they could not believe their defeat, but the distance between them and the sledge was increasing perceptibly. Eventually their contorted, galloping bodies faded into tiny specks, then melted away in the white expanses of the vast steppe.

## 6

Thus, having had his first taste of the joy of victorious battle, Otto Meissner continued the long journey with his wife and child. It was prolonged by frequent halts on the way, due to the sickness of the child who was much later to become my father. We know (for we, Meissners, were fond of listening to Granny Olga's stories about her marriage, but she did not tell them often, for she was a strict old woman, so the family legend about our German grandfather was put together from bits and pieces heard by one or other of his descendants from his aged wife), we have heard many a time that the travellers managed to reach Tuva safely and find Mr Joshua Stubbs. So Otto Meissner probably did eventually get round to measuring the fibres of the famous local asbestos. But no authentic record of this important event has survived, not any details of the Meissners' stay in the English merchant's

house. It so happened that grandmother did not talk to any of her descendants about this period, and now that she is no longer alive we know only that they were nearly devoured by wolves on the way and that they arrived at the Englishman's house with a sick child, my father having got serious diarrhoea. Nor is there any record by Otto Meissner of the stay in Tuva. The Master's brief notes on his journey round Russia end with his reflections on lambs and references to wolves and nightingales. It is possible that grandmother lost some of his papers in her journeys from one son to the other or even earlier, when she left the Far East in the late thirties to settle in Kazakhstan. Grandmother lost a lot of things on that journey, including the chest which turned up miraculously a few years later in the house of an acquaintance in Chimkent and was returned to the owner with all the precious relics it contained: papers, a tiny, dented coffee-pot, a moth-eaten check travelling rug, an ivory-handled razor, a striped Bokhara dressing gown and so on... Yet the Master's notes on Tuva may not have been lost. They may simply never have existed, because Otto Meissner no longer kept a diary. Probably he did not have any more paper: it had flown away through the air, like a flock of white birds, when the wind blew it out of the open chest. And the English merchant may not have had any paper either, except for office ledgers and the Holy Bible. Joshua Stubbs was probably a very practical man and an old bachelor, if he was not afraid of settling in such remote parts. Perhaps he did not like writing letters, and was always trying to keep fit, rubbing himself down on the veranda with snow brought to him in a bucket by a servant. Which would explain why he was probably red-faced, breathed strongly, dressed lightly and wore a cap with the ear flaps turned up even at the height of the bitter Tuvinian winters. There may have been some dependent relative living in Mr Stubb's residence, a drunken cousin, say, whom Stubbs had brought across India, then over the Gobi Desert along the caravan route on a camel, and was now trying to cure of alcoholism. The bored merchant may have liked to entertain casual visitors by teasing his cousin—the wretched fellow had gone completely berserk without drink and would secretly ask any new guest for spirits or at least a drop of some-

thing home-made. Mr Stubbs may have calculated aloud how much one day in the life of his useless cousin cost him. "Now one day of my residence here," the merchant would say, "yields an average profit of about one thousand one hundred guineas, and my upkeep costs about a thousand times less. So permit me to ask, kind sirs, is there or is there not any benefit from the life of such a sinner? But a day of my illustrious kinsman costs far more, for he smokes cigars, eats a great deal of lamb and, on occasion, as now for instance, is not averse to taking a glass or two. Whereas a man-day lived by him yields no profit whatsoever!"

Whether Mr Stubbs actually joked like that or not, we do not venture to say. Nor do we know when and in what circumstances the Meissners left the English concessionary's residence. But let the dark spot of ignorance grow bright, printed, like a negative, on the silver bromide of our imagination. A little developing fluid, my friends, in the form of good intentions, and we shall see contours and silhouettes suddenly spring up on the empty whiteness. Now they are becoming more distinct, losing the spectral quality of semi-allusion, and we can see Mr Stubbs and his noble cousin coming out onto the main porch of the residence to wave goodbye to their departing guests. There is something like tears in the eyes of Stubbs' gouty relative: the lonely soul has grown so used, so attached to the young family, especially to dear, kind Olga, who, pitying the unfortunate alcoholic and unable to bear the sight of his torment, has been secretly giving him the alcohol from her medicine chest, even pressing it out of the nickel-plated tube containing a syringe. The steadfast red-faced merchant is also upset. He coughs loudly to conceal his emotion. The old bachelor has grown fond of the baby that drank its mother's milk and ate cereal, then dirtied its nappies with the unswerving regularity and energy of a beautifully oiled machine of simple and wonderful life. Stubbs' heart could not resist such rationality. Sometimes, coming into the house from the cold, he would sniff the air like a dog, then mutter: "The Meissners' son and heir has stunk the place down again. The smell's everywhere, damn it!" Then he would take off his coat, warm his hands by the stove, and go to the visitors' quarters to let the boy grab

hold of his thick, hairy finger... But now the child was leaving, and it was unlikely that such a strange and marvellous creature would ever appear in Stubbs' house again. The merchant thought this sadly and waved a clumsy farewell.

"Goodbye, friends, goodbye!"

Let us assume that it is late February, and the fierce sun of Central Asia is shining spring-like in the empty sky, its rays flooding the flat wastes and sharp-teethed mountains of Tuva. Slanting to the earth, the straight spears of sunlight pierced the grooves and channels in the old snow, and all this gnawed away, almost bristling snow is gradually evaporating crystal by crystal, without turning into water. Soon the forest rivers will melt, rise, and form a watery web over the earth, flooding the roads, and what will the travellers do then? But begone doubt! Forward! Forward! A new driver is sitting in the box in front. No one knows who he is, whence he comes, or where his home and family are. He looks round impatiently at the passengers, his eyes resounding with the same "Forward! Forward!" Otto Meissner and his wife and child are sitting in a strange-looking conveyance rather like an ancient Russian boat. It is drawn not by horses, but by three large wolves, and we recognise them as the beasts which our brave Master of Philosophy slayed in combat. Finally the long farewell is over, Stubbs' last, cheery "goodbye" rings over everyone, and the carriage moves off. At first it floats low over the ground, then begins to soar up more and more steeply, and soon Joshua Stubbs' house, and Stubbs himself, and his relative, both waving their caps at the flying departures, are left far below.

The wolves are spread in flight, their powerful bodies pulling in and stretching taut again. The driver sits motionless in front, not looking round at the passengers, and the long journey has begun. They soared above the world in the spring of 1914 and ever since the vast globe of the planet that remained below has revolved on its axis without them.

It is possible that those on whose well-disposed cooperation and attention I am relying, may feel somewhat embarrassed by this semi-ethereal, other-worldly phantas-

magoria presented to their inner eye, by the poor wolves, first slain, then harnessed like draught-dogs to a strange boat-like carriage, by the drunken cousin and the four swarthy warriors with spears in their hands. But let the patient observer imagine the anxiety of Otto Meissner's grandson and the red-headed grandson himself, a village schoolteacher, sitting alone late at night at a large wooden table. In front of him lies a sheet of mercilessly clean paper, and on this sheet a curling white hair, a portent of early greying, barely distinguishable against the white background. The teacher hurriedly blows away the hair that has fallen from his mortal head. Nearly on the bare table stands a dark bottle with a crooked branch of pink apple blossom sticking out of the neck. Placing the tip of his sharp-pointed pencil on the paper, he begins to write: did you ever dream as a child that, for example, the distant, smooth line of the horizon (the surrounding countryside is as flat and round as a sunflower and you have a sense of your own naked vulnerability, and the apple blossom smells so sweet!)—the whole visible edge of the earth is suddenly tossed up and broken into pieces, and mushroom clouds rise to a terrible height... How awkward it is for the moving pencil to write these ugly-sounding "mushroom clouds" on paper. *Such* a thing does not and should not exist in nature. Words that reflect the true relationships of the world always sound right together. But you did have such dreams, that is the sacred truth, and each time, as your heart loses the last drop of hope, it knows full well what sort of mushrooms have grown on the edge of the invisible world and what punishment (there is no other word!) will follow after such monstrous violation of the blue heavens.

And have you ever reflected on what man might permit himself today if he is sure that there will be *nothing* tomorrow? If this question does not interest you or arouses nothing but bewilderment, that must mean, thank the Lord, that I am now speaking to the people of the Golden Age, of which the inhabitants of our time dreamed, and your eyes glow with peace, inspiration and joy, and for you old Mother Earth is a united country over which you can ramble like intoxicated bees round the dark wheel of the sunflower, to and fro, not knowing worry, care or tedious solitude until death itself.

The landscapes in the country over which the Meissners were travelling, however, were absorbing all the shades of two flags of emotion fluttered over this world: the deep of resignation and the snowy white of peace. Storey upon storey of awesome mountains rose up like bales of fresh cotton piled up by giants, between the mountains ran fine-fleeced valleys of grey sheep with an airy, bluish thickness showing through faintly here and there. There were rivers in this land, too, flowing past steep banks, and through the clear water of these rivers, at a great depth, you could just see the stripey bed. This world on high had many storeys, and above the highest and quietest reigned a deep, resigned blue. The lonely sun could only shiver in this blue, or, as it sank at dusk or rose at dawn, peep into the large side-window of one of the floors. And then the curly plains and the jutting sides of the mountains were steeped in the sliding reflections of pink, gold and purple. Dark blue shadows clustered in the gorges, carving out mighty shapes in the spectral matter of this world.

The strange wolf team ran evenly and smoothly. The powerful beasts strained hard, pulling the boat-like carriage over fleecy, tussocky plains of feathery clouds, or through white mountains of cumulous clouds, piercing them noiselessly, or along dark blue wastes between the piles of thunder-clouds, where fiery octopuses of lightning lurked. Forward! Who knows where, but forward! Awaiting us somewhere is a shining world like the fiery spiral of a great galaxy made up of countless hot, proud eyes that know not care.

The enthralled travellers sat silently in the boat, staring in amazement at the heavenly world floating past them. Otto Meissner was thrilled and delighted. He felt his soul expanding like a balloon being blown up, as it gradually absorbed the whole unfolding expanse and strove to become equally boundless. The magnitude of his own soul pleased the Master of Philosophy greatly. Olga, however, was frightened by the height which they had reached, and kept worrying that she might accidentally drop the child sleeping so peacefully on her lap.

The driver suddenly got up, fumbled in his bag, and drew out three pairs of big, white wings. He turned his moustached, homely face towards the travellers for a

moment, his eyes flashed cunningly with a restrained smile, and he fitted on the wings: one pair on his shoulders, the second on his waist, and the third to his thighs, adjusted them and immediately began to look like a six-winged swan. Then he folded them, pressed them neatly to his body and sat down on the side of the boat, dangling his legs over the edge.

Only then did the travellers notice that they were not alone in this vast, silent realm of the heavens. Accustomed to the solemn leisureliness of their flight, they now discerned, as they stared at the softly curving shapes of the surrounding landscape, a slow and incessant stirring, an intricate movement in all its parts, large and small. And soon, as if acquiring new vision, they saw that the whole of this boundless realm was densely and diversely inhabited. Here they could contemplate the lion lying down with the lamb without touching it, and the head of the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada pressed gently against the pensive face of Hans Christian Andersen, the story-teller, as if to give him a brotherly kiss.

And below them the Globe Not Made by Human Hands turned round and round, clocking up the years: 1914 ... 1941 (what a remarkable coincidence! The sum of the numbers in these figures is fifteen—the same as the sum of the numbers in the year 1905!). I was born in 1941 and died in 1997 or 1979, it does not matter which, and all my life I suffered from an inescapable anxiety. There was no room for this anxiety on earth. So, having soared in a wild flight of fancy to the uppermost layers of the atmosphere, I saw there only a white kingdom of placid clouds. But my eyes fell out of orbit, my heart burst, and the blood ceased to run in my body. This happened in 1979 or 1997, it does not matter which, and now I can speak with epic calm of *it*, of the one I bore and sensed within myself as an unuttered cry, as a fire-like silence in my breast, as a furious command to myself never to fear anything and immediately to perform some noble deed for the good of mankind or to plumb some unprecedented depths of all-devouring creation. At this very moment, when I have expressed myself and my thoughts and feelings, winging through the darkness of time, have touched you who know not this anxiety, I have achieved my aim and can now go back, to *my own*

people, and meekly taste my share of happiness among my offspring and the members of my household, toil as I please (but not break my back), snore on a soft pillow that smells of my head, and observe with pleasure the sprinkling of red-headed boys and girls that appear from time to time among my progeny, the fruit of assiduous labour by me and my wife.

Farewell, my friends. Urgent business awaits me. I have sent my grandfather and grandmother off into the clouds. It is time to bring them down to earth. And time for me to come down, as well—it is beautiful, but too cold in the cloudy heights.

## 7

I came to on the bank of a broad, asphalt river blazing with heat and swathed in petrol fumes. Iron ships sped along in this blue mist, their brightly enamelled sides flashing down the stone river. Inside them compressed fire was working and behind them the recta of the exhaust pipes roared and shook, emitting monstrous exhaust fumes into the air, which I breathed in through my gaping mouth. I had unexpectedly fainted and recovered to find myself lying on the edge of Zubovsky Square in Moscow. My arms were spread out wide on the ground, the light was gradually returning to my eyes, and the woman's face more precious to me than the restored heavens was not bent over me. I suddenly thought that I might still be able to live in this town, but not die here. Oh, no! It would be better to go out of town, walk into the forest, lie down there under a bush and roll up into a ball, clasping my knees.

Not long after that, about three weeks perhaps, I suddenly realised that as well as not being able to die here, I could not live here either... When I returned from the army, my place by my lawful wedded wife turned out to be occupied. My clever, well-educated wife told me that was *the way things were* to explain the fact that during my absence she had found someone else, a pale, tall, somewhat podgy chemical engineer, to take my place. I must not think that she had deceived me: for she had told me all about it in a letter to Kamchatka, where I

served for two years. When I was called up she did not go with me, although she could have (after university I had the rank of officer). She specialised in brain physiology and there was nothing she could do on Kamchatka. I had to resign myself to that, and also to the fact that when I came back to Moscow I had to share a room with the two of them—I had nowhere else to go. So we lived like that separated by bookcases, I was busy trying to get a job and had no intention of challenging my puffy-cheeked, pasty-faced replacement to a duel. Why bother, if it had been decided that my wife and I would get quietly divorced and split our living space. How would we duel anyway? Banging each other on the head with briefcases? But I soon realised it was impossible to live like that, even if we were all clever and well-educated, and that it was pointless to split up a small room. So I had a fight with my replacement, putting his nose out of joint, a little to the right, alas.

To cut a long story short, I soon left the capital and am now buried away in the country, chopping wood, occasionally lighting the large Russian stove, but more often cooking on two oil-stoves, carrying water from the spring, emptying the slops bucket...

So this is how I came down to earth.

The village of Tataro-Krapivenskoye, where I now live, daydream, indulge in fantasies concerning Otto Meissner and teach, is on the straight line which I have ruled on my grandfather's old geographical map from the point where he wrote "Stubbs", which is approximately on the site of the present Tuvinian town of A..., to the town of V... on the Volga, where Otto Meissner arrived with his wife and child in the summer of 1914.

Their actual journey did not follow this line ruled on paper, of course, but I attach special significance to it, imagining that they must have crossed this imaginary straight line from Tuva to the Volga several times on their meandering journey. Of the three villages in the area with schools—Tataro-Krapivenskoye, Russko-Krapivenskoye and Petrovka—I chose the first, because it was situated closest of all to this imaginery thread, and I did not hesitate in my choice, although the two other villages are larger and livelier and the schools there

bigger, whereas my Tatarskoye has only eight forms for sixty-five pupils.

I was given a rickety log cabin with a straw roof like an old haystack, nibbled at the edges and riddled with mouseholes, as temporary accommodation, but I have already spent the winter in it and am not thinking about finding new rooms yet. The house stands by itself not far from the school. Right behind my untended kitchen garden where nothing has been planted, is a big field fringed in the far distance by a blue crenellated strip of forest. One evening in the deep purple twilight that had descended on this unploughed field, an orange wisp of fire flashed in the distance, and a moment later the evening silence was shattered by the sound of a gun shot. And I imagined the six-winged driver of the wolf-drawn carriage flying over the forest—his three pairs of white swan wings slowly rising and falling together, and in his hand he held the smoking firearm, with the barrel pointing downwards.

Now it is early May outside. The field has been ploughed and sown. Its huge dark body stretches out left of the forest in a smooth curve and its upper part climbs up to the sky like the crust of a large earthen cottage loaf, blocking the distant expanses. It takes me longer to get to the forest now, because I have to walk along the broad green strip round the field, but I often go there these days after work.

In front of the real forest with oak, birch and aspen is a nice little wood of hazel and bird cherry, dotted with wild apple trees. They are in blossom now and, remembering how fleeting is the time of their fragrant maidenhood, I try to go there as often as possible. The carefree joy of spring that I seek in these walks comes to me from the whites, blues and greens of nature: the clouds, the sky and the budding May foliage. But when frothy clouds of apple blossom drift into this perfect triad my carefree serenity comes to an end. I gaze at a pink apple tree with a painful feeling of bewilderment. At what joy as yet unclaimed, at what fantastic heights of harmony does it hint? I go up close to the tree, stand amid its branches and stare at the bunches of blossom, the separate flowers, the open or half-open petals, and the scarlet dots marking the tops of the buds. But even close up it

is still a mystery. I torment myself, and come here to be tormented.

Yesterday I cut three branches of apple blossom and returned to the village having resolved to give them to the first woman I met and gaze into her eyes, trying to guess my fate instantly and without error. But after crossing the ravine and mounting the bridge, I saw the primary class teacher, Zaigidia Ibragimovna, standing on it with a stick in her hand, evidently waiting for the cattle to come home. She had three children from her husband, the collective farm mechanic Isai, a strapping fellow with red hair like mine. She kept a cow and about fifteen sheep and her hands were grimy from work. In the long break at school she used to run home to feed the chickens and milk the goat... Nevertheless, true to my intention, I handed Zaigidia Ibragimovna two branches of apple blossom. She accepted them shily with some constraint, and her broad, strong, freckled face seemed to reflect the pink petals.

A little later I sat at home in the yard, lazing on the bench and watching the evening herd returning along the village street. First came the goats at a jog-trot, heads bent in thought and beards shaking, followed by a dark stream of flocking sheep, making their silly bleating noise with open mouths that showed their grey tongues. A pungent dust rose up over them and through its golden cloud the heavy, silently panting herd of cows forced its way, rubbing against the creaking fences. When the cattle had gone women and children flitted past in the dusty haze, in pursuit of some silly errant sheep. Housewives standing by open gates called out in high, most promising but, to my mind, rather sad voices:

"Ka-a-atya! Ka-tya-katya-kat!"

My pupil Mariam, a slender, graceful girl, rode past the gate on a ram. She was trying to dig her long, thin legs into the ground, which she could barely reach, pushing with all her might to make the silent, resisting ram move in the direction of home. Mariam's thin, serious face was flushed. She did not look in my direction, but I could guess from her lowered head and vacant stare that my presence embarrassed her. I rose from the bench, went through the gate and gave the ram a kick on his shaggy backside.

"That's a girl, Mariam!" I shouted after the disappearing rider, whose steed had noticeably put on a spurt.

Towards her on another ram galloped a certain Usman Kelembetov who was in the sixth form. He had no need of my assistance for he was a strong, muscular lad and the ram beneath him was not very stubborn. Grinning at me all over his pleasant, grey-eyed countenance, Usman Kelembetov pushed the black, dusty ram along quickly by the horns, holding it between his straddling legs. I turned to go back through the gate.

Suddenly a young fleecy lamb rushed past my knees, ran out of the yard, and trotted off by the fence, bleating pitifully. I recognised it from the blue ribbon tying the fleece on its back, like a plait on a village girl's head. It was always mistaking the yards and straying into mine. This was the lamb Otto Meissner had met on his journey along the cheerless autumn road: it had been lying on the shoulders of its master who held it by the feet, and it had raised its head on the slender neck with meek supplication in its eyes. I reflected that my pity for this creature had no rational basis. Then out of the misty depths of the past a boundless childhood grievance emerged. I had once seen a film, I can't remember which, with some very realistic shots of wolves attacking a flock of sheep and killing ewes. Baring its teeth wickedly, a beast gnawed at a ewe's neck meekly presented to it. The ewe was dying, quivering limply and moving its feet, its eyes gradually glazing. The makers of the film had evidently intended that this scene should arouse in the audience pity for the ewe and anger at the cruel wolf. Yet I, deeply moved by it, felt something quite different. I looked almost with hatred not at the murderous wolf but at the meekly dying ewe. There were no tears, only a deep *resentment* that not one of the ewes had been angry enough to try and butt the cruel predators...

Later that evening I sat alone at the table. Otto Meissner and his wife and son were sailing through the clouds on the wolf-drawn boat-carriage, and far below them the huge planet revolved, clocking up more and more new time circuits. I became concerned for the Master of Philosophy when his soul opened up to meet the unfolding expanse of the heavens and began to match its greatness: my heart, on the contrary, had shrunk into a tiny, cold

ball. Otto Meissner had taken my love and my lamb and was now leading me towards an endless white Nothingness in which all my disturbing separateness, the tiny ball of my self-centredness, would at last be dissolved. The desire for immediate, instant harmony lifted me higher and higher to Otto Meissner, to his shining face, and staring sadly into the night through the wretched window of my hovel I was ready to take the wine bottle with the crooked branch of apple blossom and throw it through the dark glass. But then something soft thudded down against this window outside, then something else flashed past and thudded down. The huge wolves were straining forward in their racing flight: oh well, even a wolf's death should acquire meaning and significance in the world of white harmony where Otto Meissner was calling me. And almost weeping at my lonely helplessness, I dropped through the clouds, through the years, through the imperceptible moment of my birth, through my mythical childhood and difficult, solitary youth and stumbled into the street through the dark lobby. Walking up to the window of my house which shone like a bright searchlight amid the invisible sleeping village, I heard some muffled, girlish laughter and then the sound of rapidly receding feet. On the ground under my window I found some elder branches with fragrant white blossom. Someone had thrown them through the window, evidently pitying a person's solitude at this late hour.

In the morning I stood in front of the same window, which I had opened wide, put on a tie and combed my long hair in front of the mirror on the wall, getting ready to go to school and teach History there. Through the open window I could see the children going to school. And my colleagues: the teacher of Russian language and literature Svetlana Borisovna, a dyed blonde with young slim legs (who peeped into my window), beside her the curly-headed PT instructor Shamil Ravilevich and, trying to catch them up, the smiling Zaigidia Ibragimovna, Isai's wife, who had put on a smart blue jumper to go to work. My favourite, Mariam, passed by quickly in her dear skipping gait, with a red kerchief round her neck and her carefully combed hair drawn back with a ribbon at the nape of her neck. Well, then, it was time for me, descendant of Hanseatic merchants, son of a Kazakhstan rice-grower

and grandson of a Master of Philosophy o Königsberg University, to set off too.

Grandmother Olga said that Otto Meissner caught a cold on the way from Tuva to the Volga and before he had fully recovered fell ill again with typhoid, as a result of which he almost died. But grandmother managed to cure him and, wishing to put her weakened husband on his feet again, took him out of the small town where he had lain with typhoid, and for two months, May and June, the Meissners lived in a rich village on the European side of the Urals, breathing the fresh air, drinking milk and eating their fill of the tasty fish in the local river. The child, my father, had its first birthday there, and on that day they celebrated in the traditional manner, even inviting some of the local peasants. The only thing that grandmother did not like about this village, judging from her accounts, was the large number of nightingales there. "The wretched birds didn't let us sleep," the old woman would tell us. And, judging by this single disapproving comment of our extremely exacting grandmother and also remembering that she was much younger then and loved her fair husband with all the strength of her awakened womanhood, we can assume that this halt in the long journey was a happy sojourn for them.

"It is now time to tell a story which grandmother Olga often told. The Koreans have a little devil, a tiny demon, who may suddenly appear under your feet in a whirlwind of dust, a minute, pot-bellied devil, who looks as benevolent and harmless as a black dung-beetle... Suddenly he begins to grow, still looking ingratiating, slightly absurd, so you watch laughing as he shoots up before your eyes. But soon you see, faltering, that he is now as high as a tree, then a bell-tower, and he is continuing to grow and, most important, he no longer looks kind-hearted. He is snarling savagely, occasionally poking out his red tongue, like a flame-thrower spewing napalm. His huge eyes flash and smoke pours from his nostrils. And your hair stands on end with terror. The devil keeps on growing, shooting up to the sky. Now his head breaks through the ceiling of the clouds, and soon only his enormous feet stick out of the short, ragged trousers of cloud. His head and body are hidden in the heavens, and now you can

only guess at the real dimensions of this gigantic figure. Suddenly one of his feet begins to lift slowly, and an immense sole, the size of mountain, is poised over you. There is no escape. Any moment now he will stamp his foot, press hard, and you will be no more... But there is a secret of salvation. You must know it in advance, of course: if you can just keep yourself under control and not be overwhelmed by the hallucination, look down instead of standing and staring hypnotically upwards, the demon shrinks at once. And as you lower your line of vision, he grows proportionately smaller... Now, having overcome your initial fright, you can even venture to play with him, that is, raise your eyes slightly, so that the devil shoots up to the height of a telegraph pole, say, then, when he assumes a threatening appearance and begins to belch smoke, shorten him immediately. Eventually you can will your eyes to nail the pot-bellied devil to the ground, reduce him to the size of a cockroach, then walk up quickly and stamp on him with your foot.

This story epitomises grandmother Olga's nature, from her bold youth to her grave and beautiful old age immersed in noble silence, when she seemed to be listening to distant chorales of ancient legends and her own recollections of real life that had become equally legendary. In her ability to absorb the whole immense bulk of human fear at a glance, by running her eyes up and down, and her skill at casting it from on high down into the dust, and stamping on it with her small foot lies the whole secret and essence of her character. Let us call it by the ordinary word "courage", which she taught us, too, by the example of her worthy life as woman and mother.

In the provincial Volga town of V. the white walls of the merchants' houses shone amid the deep green of apple and cherry orchards, and a refreshing coolness floated from the river into the wide-open windows overlooking the Volga. In this town with the still, hot silence of its midday streets and the ringing of the bells on its four or five churches, lived tradesmen immersed in their businesses, state officials who ran the local society, and also corn-chandlers, the ubiquitous petty bourgeois, bargees, common people and the famous Volga tramps. The

decorous evening calm with mellow chimes that carried far away and the barely audible lapping of the many quays and landing stages with barges, boats and ships moored to them—this delightful, soothing silence was ensured by the wealth of the local rich men, one of whom was Semyon Kurtovich Harzheim, a corn trader. It was to him that the Master of Philosophy went with Friedrich Meissner's letter of recommendation that had been written in advance, two years before the hot summer day when his grandson unexpectedly presented himself to the perspiring and surprised Harzheim in his office. The grandson could not have known that quite recently there had been a business disagreement between old Meissner and his Volga partner, but nevertheless the Master sensed something, because the corn dealer was somewhat curt in welcoming his guest and immediately announced that due to an influenza epidemic he could not receive the visitors with a young child in his own house, but was compelled to concede this honour to his partner Chumasov, whom he at once introduced to the Master and then dismissed the two of them without further ado, pleading urgent business.

Ilya Chumasov, a young man with flat, shaven cheeks, curly hair and shy evasive eyes, had found himself on his father's early demise the proud owner of a corn-chandler's business and a large stone house with Doric columns which, for some reason, were upside down with the capitals at the bottom. He had a corpulent childless wife of immense proportions and common descent, whom the corn chandler had married for love. Her name was Nadya. She stared with keen and unconcealed curiosity at the exotic looking Olga and straightaway conceived a great affection for her. Rapidly and impetuously but also very sensibly she settled the visitors comfortably in two spare rooms of her spacious house. Then began the joint feeding of the baby and a bountiful meal for the visitors and evening tea-drinking on the veranda between the upside-down columns, with a broad view of the Volga dotted here and there with long, dark motionless barges.

The next day the whole house was drawn into the whirlwind of Nadya's hospitality, special jam was made from a transparent, golden apples, then the bathhouse was heated, from which both women emerged flushed and

attractively freshened, with towels round their wet heads. Only to learn from Ilya Chumasov, who met them on the porch, that the Russo-German war had begun.

At that moment Otto Meissner was visiting Harzheim, from whom, according to his grandfather's instructions, he was to receive money to continue his journey and also written orders as to his further itinerary. But the Master received neither, learning only about the outbreak of war, and returned to Chumasov's house with a heavy heart. The two men met in the yard and pretended not to have noticed each other. But their wives at this moment were weeping together, hiding away in the far room for the guests.

After that events moved very quickly. Otto Meissner, a German subject travelling around Russia for unknown purposes, was placed under surveillance and ordered not to leave the area. Evidently the police authorities in the town of V. did not know what else to do with him, and therefore did nothing else for the time being. The easiest thing would be to arrest him as a spy. That was clear to everyone, including the Master of Philosophy himself, and he was expecting to be arrested. But after tormenting himself in vain for several days, Otto Meissner, who could no longer endure the uncertainty, resolved to go out and meet danger halfway...

One day he told his wife that he had decided to go to the police and surrender his revolver. His wife approved of this decision. Otto Meissner left the house, and Olga leaned against the window watching him as he walked across the Chumasovs' wide courtyard to the gate... Her husband had changed greatly in the last few months. His head was closely cropped after the typhoid, and he now wore not a soft and comfortable travelling cloak, but a stiffly ironed three-piece suit and a new bowler hat. Always thin, he now looked positively emaciated. He had acquired the habit of frowning hard and resignedly during his long, silent meditations. Olga knew that he was a very lonely man with great inner goodness and a gentle disposition, but unshakeable in his resolve. Watching as he crossed the yard, tall, erect, and dignified, delicately stepping round the broody hen and her chicks on the way, Olga suddenly cried out, then pulled herself together, but could not help crying out again, and put

her hand over her mouth. The child woke and sat up in his bed, swaying like a flower, his eyes wandering sleepily. But taking no notice of him, Olga rushed out of the room, with a terrible awareness that now it was her husband, not her son, who needed her help and protection.

Olga ran across the empty yard. The hen jumped out of her way with an anxious, threatening squawk, its feathers on end. She ran into the road, but both sides of the dusty, unpaved street were deserted. Only a travelling nomad in a cap and sheepskin jacket, with a camel on reins, stood on the high bank by the near bend to the river, admiring the ships and barges sailing down the Volga. And at this moment the woman's second child stirred within her.

Olga returned to the Chumasovs' house and never saw her husband again. The Master of Philosophy had disappeared, as if he had dissolved into the thin midday air, as he went out of the gate into the deserted street.

## 8

To cut things short, the man disappeared leaving a wife with one child in her arms and another in her womb in a strange house without a penny, and without hope or protection against the flaring flames of the unprecedented war. Ilya Chumasov wanted to volunteer for active service, but Nadya would not let him, so he became a member of the Black Hundred out of patriotism and gave the guest nasty looks from afar, obviously wishing to throw the hostile alien's wife out of the house. The fair-headed, ox-eyed Nadya with her broad, sensitive pink mouth was worn out these days, what with restraining her husband from going off to the war and keeping him away from her defenceless friend on whom the corn-chandler sought to vent his patriotic wrath. Ilya quarreled with his business master Semyon Harzheim, although the latter was a Russian subject and his family had been living on the Volga for two generations, and this step brought the corn-chandler nothing but considerable financial loss and earned him the ridicule of his business acquaintances, as a result of which he became even more embittered. He felt that these days had brought him an awakening,

and that, having been awakened, he now understood who he was and why he was alive, but the different Ilya could not explain this to anyone, and without such an explanation no one could understand him. Ilya Chumasov was agile, with the muscular body of a man made for fighting, for carefree unashamed plundering, in a word, for turning his hand to any sort of warfare, be it with sword and sabre as in the old days, or with firearms as now. But his wife got the better of him, she kept him under and squashed him down, drove him into a corner and used her fists and broad, hard knees to force him into a secluded room where she kept him under lock and key. Returning to her guest, Nadya would quickly fondle the other woman's child, sob together with Olga and swear that nothing would happen: everything would be alright and he, the rascal, loved her, so he wouldn't get up to anything bad. But one day Ilya jumped out of the window and did go off to the war. He wrote his wife a letter from the Austrian front that began with "a heartfelt greeting and all best wishes to my lawful spouse Nadezhda Prokhorovna".

A quiet, melancholy time began for the two women in the large house. In the winter Olga gave birth to her second child, and when the river became clear of ice in spring Nadya took them by boat to Khvalinsk and from there by cart to the distant village where her father, an old bargee, lived. And here they stayed, the two women who had become more vital to each other than even a sister or a mother, because in their mutual grief they had been visited by the great and undiminishing joy of human friendship.

Nadya's father was a taciturn, hard-working old man, who had been widowed long ago and had lived on his own on the edge of the village in a large old house on the high bank of the Volga. The old man was evidently pleased at the arrival of the visitors and the life which invaded his neglected house, and although he said nothing to confirm this, he began to work even more diligently. He was a long, sinewy, grey-haired old man with such an insignificant, although by no means ugly or strange face, that it was impossible to recall when you were no longer looking at it. He seemed to have been created by the Lord not to attract attention and be remembered,

but only to work. And he seemed to realise this and accepted his fate, to work, work and work again, with a guilty, quiet meekness. Thanks to his labours the large family lived through the war with Germany and the civil war after the revolution, and survived the starvation and plague on the Volga.

Ilya Chumasov appeared once only. He arrived with a rifle one night, stinking of sweat, lice-ridden, aged and embittered beyond recognition. He was not on good terms with the Red power which had been established by then, so he hid and went away a few days later to join a small local gang. Shortly afterwards he was found dead on the steep path leading to his father-in-law's house. Apparently he had crawled there after being thrown off the high railway bridge in a hand-to-hand skirmish and left for dead, although he had recovered consciousness at night and crawled several versts in the darkness.

Nadya, who had not seen her husband for almost ten years and had grown used to his absence, buried him calmly, without shedding a tear, as if he were a stranger. But something changed in her, probably after the pathetic death of her husband who was reaching out for her. She became more morose, often shouting at her taciturn father, Olga and the children. She began to eat indiscriminately, put on weight and dressed carelessly. Her grey, inquisitive eyes grew dull, her shoulders hunched, the smile almost disappeared from her face, and she never wept now. Only in 1925 when Olga and her big boys decided to go back to her native land, the Far East, did Nadya's gloomy indifference leave her, and she wept and grieved loudly as in the old days.

Her father was now deaf and went about his painstaking work very slowly, and Nadya was terrified at the thought that she would be left alone, without Olga and the children. True, by that time she had begun to meet a railway-worker from a distant halt, but he had a wife sick with consumption and five children. The friends' final parting was probably painful, but we know nothing of it. Let us imagine that their tears were bright and their words of farewell sad and beautiful. They had a rare friendship, which had protected and preserved life. And it is fitting that I should speak of this, for I am the grandson

of Otto Meissner whose offspring was saved by this friendship.

You should know that, apart from the great deeds about which History tells us, Mankind lived its own private, inner life which had as many parts as there were people in this Mankind. One of the common features of the private life of our thoughts and feelings was the lack of correspondence between what we wanted and what we had. Thus, for example, Nadya might wake up in the stifling embraces of her railwayman and imagine in a darkness swirling with sleepy dreams, that it was the young, strong Ilya pressing her to his heart, but a moment later she found out that this was not so, and she would weep quietly, washing the other man's chest with her tears, then fall asleep again and sense in her vague dreams that all was not well in her life and that there was no end to or name for the sadness that gripped her sleeping heart. And in the morning she would be woken by a friendly dig in the shoulder and see before her the gingery bristle on the elderly man's face, a face so distinct, so plain and substantial, as if there were not and could not be any other faces more beautiful, inspired and profoundly exciting. And after yawning widely at the ceiling the railwayman would ask Nadya, "Why d'ye cry in the night then?" To which she would reply: "It's nothin'... Must have had a bad dream." And in the morning she would wonder sadly where her bosom friend Olga was now. How many years would pass before Nadya's lonely heart stopped aching at the memory of her lost friendship!

For Olga this heartache lasted right into old age. With the years she spoke with increasing indifference and reluctance of her husband, but remembered Nadya who had sheltered her with more and more nostalgia. "If I could only see Nadya once more!" she would say, sighing. "Is she alive or not... Anyone can die... One day she cut up a new linen sheet to make shirts for my little ginger-headed boys." She recalled a half-forgotten fact: "It was the last thing from Nadya's dowry." But in all her numerous reminiscences about her lost friend, Olga never mentioned why, in spite of such a strong affection for Nadya, she had decided to set off with her two children along the endless roads of Russia and Siberia towards the distant Amur. The revolution, civil war, foreign

intervention and banditry had left deeply pitted tracks in time and space, and to cross this vast country with no money was not an easy task for a woman with two children. Olga and her boys followed the famous route of escaping convicts and Siberian vagabonds, but they were travelling in the opposite direction. On the way she had to make frequent long stops in order to earn some money to keep them and help them on their way. And it was not until 1927 that she reached her native village leading her two fiery-headed boys.

Thus her unprecedented striving towards her goal ended happily. But to what goal? Her father and mother were dead, the house destroyed, and her sister, who had survived, was living in a tiny hovel that used to be a goose shed. Olga had never heard or read the words of the Yugoslav philosopher, who said something to the effect that creation is our way of reconciling dream and reality. It had never occurred to her that she was creating, reconciling dream and reality, by marrying a magical foreign prince and going to the ends of the world with him, bearing him children and, after losing him, returning to her native village fifteen years later. Reality was hard and evidently her dream came true only to a small extent, but as a result of her lost youth there remained something that really did resemble the masterpieces of, say, Raphael or Michelangelo. What does it matter whether we call it *A Feat of Life*, the *Sistine Madonna* or *Victory*. For creation to triumph finally, it is necessary that the fruits of ardent passion, the labours and zeal of the artist should remain forever among people spiritually related to the creator. For this reason Olga had to return to her people, and return she did. With this return she brought her work to completion, as it were, presenting it to the world in all its uniqueness and qualitative originality. And in this endeavour Olga showed the courage and determination of the artist, not the craftsman. What helped the inexperienced girl to rise to such heights of courage? Perhaps our belief in youth that life is given to us only for something unusual and joyful! And that we must fear nothing! And it is in the finality of Olga's fearlessness, in her desire to do something unprecedented, that she differs from timid people, like old Prokhor, Nadya's father, who also created, but as a craftsman who

sensed that his goal was quantitative production rather than qualitative transformation. This explains why he was able to plant and dig up the same old potatoes year in year out and fish so patiently and meekly with net and hook for the same old Volga fish. But let us be fair: was it not his potatoes and fish that saved Olga and her children, and with them the whole present Meissner family? This truth is beyond question. It is the anonymous kindness of people who are mortal and know it that has saved our life. So what was the reason for these people's silent goodwill to the casual foreign visitors cast up by the storm on the strange shore of their life?

Some masterpieces by world-famous painters contain special features which are not of any great significance for art, but arouse in the spectator a painful sense of their uniqueness. Like the bandage on the severed ear in Van Gogh's self-potrait and the heel of the Prodigal Son in Rembrandt's painting, which are so famous among art historians. Or the long necks and moles in Piero della Francesca's portraits, the blue cloak in Francesco Guardi's *Venetian Court* and the old woman's grim masculine face in Le Nain's *The Dairymaid's Family*. These special signs are like the birthmarks on a person's face that one remembers somehow separately from the face itself. In the masterpiece of Olga Meissner *ame*, as grandmother Olga was called in the Korean settlements of Kazakhstan, this special sign was the reddish gold hair of certain members of her numerous offspring.

Her two sons grew up and married Korean girls from their village, begetting with them a grand total of eleven children, and these eleven begot their own children—here it is before you, my grandmother's canvas with dark colouring and fiery tints all over it. In this multi-figured composition we see honest tillers of the soil and equally honest brainworkers, regular soldiers, and even an art historian who has published a work entitled "Pencil Sketches of Post-Impressionism".

One day in the latter half of the twentieth century the art historian in question arrived at the district centre where his brother lived. The newcomer was in a state of some "mental anguish", got off the train with a large

suitcase and took a taxi straight to his brother's place of work. The latter was extremely surprised to see his relative holding a large suitcase on the threshold of his spacious, forbidding office. They both had red hair.

So I went to see my cousin, for it is time to confess that I am the author of "Pencil Sketches of Post-Impressionism". My cousin worked in the district educational department, and I had come to ask him to find me a teaching job in a village school. I could teach history or draughtsmanship and drawing. I had already left my old job, got divorced, and given up my Moscow registration, so my cousin was confronted with a *fait accompli.*

"Why on earth did you want to do that?" he asked in amazement. "Who ever would choose to move from Moscow to the countryside these days? Who would even think of such a thing?"

Well, I could have told my cousin who thinks about such a thing. One of my ex-wife's friends, a chief engineer at a factory, has a friend who *arbeitet* in the foreign trade department, and they used to get together—the two attractive *Fraus* and their two well-fed city husbands—and talk about the end of the world being nigh. A giant asteroid was flying towards the earth, and a global atmospheric pollution was raising the temperature by two degrees and melting the polar ice, so there would be a flood. And all this conversation went on after some excellent brandy on a full stomach, with lots of tooth-picking. Yes, they would say it was time to get a job bee-keeping, to chuck up everything and move into the country to look after bees with the children, to live in the forest. (My ex-wife's friend had, for her sake, abandoned his first wife, having presented the latter with two children and left her the flat and the car as consolation, a fact which he subsequently bemoaned bitterly.) I had heard all this when I was behind the bookcases in the same room and even I, fool that I was, had realised that none of these well-fed people would ever go and look after bees. Not on your life. They would concentrate on getting a bigger flat.

I could have told my cousin what a change had come over my cheerful, active little wife in the two years that I was serving in Kamchatka. After life in that quiet, remote outpost, Moscow seemed different from before,

but none of the changes that I noticed straightaway impressed me as much as the metamorphosis in my wife. And I realised that it was not this podgy, pale-faced man, her new life's companion, who had taken her away from me, but some mysterious evil spirit... By the time I returned my wife had defended her candidate's thesis, and no longer wore her flaxen hair falling straight down to her shoulders, but had it curled into ringlets on her forehead and temples, which made her look like Botticelli's Judith, a Judith with a young, indifferent face, who had just cut off someone's head; she had now developed a passion for going round smart shops, which she had never evinced before, and anyway there hadn't been enough money either. She had brought home a black dog with whiskers, assuring everyone that he was a pedigree Scotch terrier, but in spite of his pedigree the poor creature was stupid and untidy, making a mess, and shedding his long hair all over the flat. The other tenants protested, complained and threatened to sue her. The animal was locked up in her room for days on end, howling and barking incessantly, and they had a young baby. At first, before I had found a job, I had no choice but take it for walks. And the slave blessed its fate, as the poet says. We soon grew used to each other, the dog accepted me as his master, and he became my sole companion in those days of loneliness and quiet despair. But our friendship was not destined to last for long. He got ring-worm, the neighbours complained with renewed vigour, and one day my wife took him to an "institution" where the poor creature was put to sleep forever. This act showed her exactly for what she was. In fact, my wife had behaved in just the same way with me: first she seemed to love me, then I ceased to please her—only there was no institution where she could get rid of me. But she would have, and cried afterwards, like the time she got rid of Top, as the "pedigree" Scotch terrier was called. I was amazed at the cruelty of this delicate little creature so sensitive and given to weeping.

No, she hadn't been like that before. She had liked things to be quiet, orderly and efficient at home, but now she and the new room-mate were always having some kind of artificial, restless celebration, or rather, always preparing for some form of enjoyment, relaxation,

"having a good time". They snatched greedily at everything that came within their reach as if secretly afraid that they would not be allowed to have what they wanted, and were prepared to take it hurriedly, any old how, upside down, as long as they managed in time... And my wife's choice of a new life's companion was calculated to provide her with a partner in this frantic race, this path to the satisfaction of the most diverse desires. I would no longer do for it. I was too simple and slow, and didn't earn enough money.

All the people with whom my wife mixed now were the same as her. They could exist only in fairly small groups. Solitude or large gatherings of people confused them. There are beetles like that. You find them in the most unexpected places: on wayside posts, under shed walls, on a half-rotten logs at the edge of the forest. They are commonly called "firemen", probably because of the bright red of their wing-cases which are dotted with black. I have never seen them fly, and I have not heard that they are useful, or that they do any harm. They usually sit in small groups, dozing in the sun. Yet in spite of their love of idleness, they scuttle off rapidly at the approach of danger. They look fairly intelligent then. Nobody has counted how many of them there are in the world, but recently their numbers have been increasing.

In the human version each "fireman" embodying this useless natural phenomenon feels a violent loathing for any sort of creativity, both of the artist that transforms matter qualitatively, and of the craftsman, that increases it quantitatively. But they are all very fond of comfort and always trying to grab something before it is too late, above all substantial material things, because they have nothing else to hold on to. And watching them, I sometimes reflected sadly that all the endeavours of the great artists I knew had been in vain.

...But I did not know how to say all this, even to my own cousin. I merely asked him to give me grandfather's papers. My cousin used to teach German in a school, and when grandmother Olga died he took Otto Meissner's notes to read them. While I was in the army I studied German hard in my free time and now I could make sense of grandfather's papers myself...

"Take them by all means," my cousin replied with a

tired yawn. "To tell the truth I haven't read them yet. Haven't had time. It would be interesting to know what he was like... You must tell me later..."

This conversation took place in an office darkened by curtains breathing faintly in the breeze, as if on an island or, rather, in an isolated cave of quiet, cool orderliness (the outside world from which I had come was panting with the heat of an unusually dry summer, and the education office was being decorated, dust drifted in the slanting rays of light, the staircases were powdered with alabaster and someone was cutting a water pipe with a steel file). We sat on opposite sides of a wide desk, the polished surface of which gleamed coldly. New leather armchairs stood round it in strict symmetry. My cousin, the creator of this state-provided comfort and exemplary tidiness, was pale, freckled, high-cheekboned and round-faced, in a clean blue shirt with short sleeves. Above his sharply receding hairline the breeze stirred his red hair, in which the spider of time had already woven a silvery web. Like me, my cousin showed a tendency to go grey early, which we had probably inherited from grandmother Olga, whom I always picture with snowy white hair, in the white jacket and skirt, worn by old Koreans for mourning and burial, which she had worn constantly for her last twenty years, calmly awaiting her hour. Next to my cousin in a comfortable brown armchair sat our grandfather Otto Meissner, holding a cane and a felt bowler hat on his lap. The Master of Philosophy looked younger than his greying grandsons. This, at least, is how it appeared to me, for I assumed, like everyone else in our family, that the noble Master had perished in the hot summer of 1914. Grandmother Olga herself had said so, adding that he was a delicate person with a nature "as straight as a stick", too proud and gentle to live for long in this world. He could not stand it for example, when people brushed against him, pushed him or simply stared hard at him... My ghostly philosopher grandfather, as I imagined him next to my civil servant cousin, was closer and more understandable to me than my real flesh-and-blood cousin. And I remembered that, only a few days ago when I was rushing round Moscow, oppressed by the infernal heat and the smell of burning, I had suddenly pictured to myself for the first

time the grandfather I had never seen and tried to address him in my mind. And I had suddenly discovered something on which I had previously never tried to reflect: his terrible predestined loneliness just before the end...

Not far from Moscow and further out in the neighbouring regions the turf bogs were burning and acrid smoke floated over the dust and heat of the city stones, alarming people. I was standing on the edge of a large square, with a vein throbbing, pulsating in my temple. Somewhere those smug conversations about atmospheric pollution and the asteroid were going on. And I thought that it was perhaps not only the desire to justify their careless greed and hasty snatching at the good things of life that made my "firemen" reflect so gloomily on the future of mankind, as I had believed earlier. Say they really did believe that the end of the world was nigh and lived in expectation of an imminent catastrophe? The "firemen" of all ages and epochs must have believed this, which is why they predicted the coming of the day of judgement, wrapped themselves in white sheets and crept off to the cemetery at dawn. This is also why any sort of creativity became meaningless for them. And my flaxen-haired wife with the two crimson petals of her expertly painted lips, who fell out of love with me and managed to defend her thesis but then forgot all about learning, was more a tragic figure than a satirical one.

To believe or not to believe? (A purely religious question and this religion was defined long ago. Lev Tolstoy discusses it in his treatises: brotherhood, unity...) It was unpleasant in Moscow. I felt sick at heart. A sombre haze obscured the glaring eye of the sun, and the unaccustomed smell of the burning bogs seemed to go up your nostrils into your brain, giving birth there to the dismal, crazy idea that we were on fire—the Earth was on fire, it was smouldering underfoot, like a bale of tow. To believe or not to believe? Can genuine human despair be morally assessed? Does a person answer for himself when he suddenly ceases to believe in goodness? One day at that time, drawing my pay at my new job in a museum, I was signing the receipt form in the usual way with a long flourish—Mesner, when I suddenly wondered why and how this strange surname had come to me and why I in particular had acquired it. Deep in thought I thrust the

money into the back pocket of my trousers and stood open-mouthed by the cashier's window. Like a bolt from the blue it was suddenly clear to me why my grandfather had decided on such an action. I even saw the light fading away slowly in his eyes and the world which he was leaving forever darkening rapidly, but unable to go out completely—as if the highest secret of life was that its light will never be engulfed by darkness...

And now, sitting in the model office of my cousin, the head of the district education department, next to him and the ghost of my grandfather, who was barely discernible in the semi-darkness, I felt that all three of us, so calm and alike with the family features of resoluteness and will-power on our faces, were each eaten away inside by the same inescapable anxiety of the twentieth century. And I felt a sudden scorching pity for my worn-out, hard-working cousin, for my incorporeal philosopher grandfather, who cast not a shadow on the brown back of the armchair, and for myself.

## 9

He made for the river, having decided to go along the quiet back streets to the police station where he would surrender his revolver. Beyond the last house in the street, which ended in a bend of the steep slope down to the river, stood a solitary nomad with a camel on a grassy knoll. Covered in the same dust or bleached to the same shade under the sun of the rolling steppes, this nomad in his leather jacket and the camel in a skin that was bald in many places, were both the colour of ancient ashes, as if they had just emerged from remote Biblical times. But, looking round and fixing his slanting eyes exaltedly on the Master, this living chip of motionless Asia suddenly broke into a slow and melodic song, perhaps about how fine the barges looked on the broad, blue Volga and how abundant the human riches sailing in innumerable ships on the water. Seeing Otto Meissner's aloof expression, however, and suddenly realising that his song might not be understood by the pale man in the hat, the nomad turned back to the river and broke into song again just for himself. The camel kept chewing the cud in its mouth,

rolling its grey, hairy lower lip, the lashes half-shading its wild eyes, and one of its humps flopping sideways, like a woman's emaciated breast. The Master walked past them, knowing that they were all three phantoms to one another—tiresome visions from another reality.

Otto Meissner walked along the unpaved embankment to the steep, up which, a long wooden staircase without railings and supported by posts wound its way through the thicket of tall weeds. At the bottom of the slope was a strip of white sand, covered with litter, and a lot of boats, their sides touching, were lying upside down not far from the water. Some naked children were hiding among the boats and had lit a bonfire. A skinny youth with sharply protruding ribs darted away from it, slipping round a boat and ran up to the Master, his bare sharp-pointed pod dangling as he ran.

"Give us some baccy for a smoke, sir!" he shouted hoarsely, his peeling face frowning and screwed up in the sun.

"A cigar or a fag!"

Otto Meissner tapped his pockets and spread out his hands to indicate that he had none, he did not smoke. The naked boy shook his long curls and rushed back to the fire, where the children laughed loudly at something. The Master began to go up the steps, occasionally glancing down at the little aborigines making merry. He wondered what they would do if he gave his revolver to them. Probably try to shoot someone. At least a dog or a cat. "Then why am I proposing to hand this weapon over to grown man-wolves, who are far more savage?" he thought in dismay.

At the top was a quiet street that ran parallel to the town's main street which Otto Meissner was making for and where the police station stood. From the roadway, as yet out of sight, came a faint, menacing clamour, but here it was deserted and peaceful. A small plump lady walked past, lifting her skirt with both hands to avoid the dust, and a long waggon loaded with sacks stood by an open warehouse. The wide-open door of the warehouse looked dark and mysterious, and the man unloading the waggon, who was powdered with flour, kept disappearing into this darkness with a heavy sack on his back. Otto Meissner thought that if he were to shoot a hole in the

bulging sack, a stream of flour would come pouring out. And if he were to shoot a hole in his temple... The Master frowned with distaste, imagining the scene.

Walking down an alley criss-crossed with washing lines of home laundry, Otto Meissner soon came out onto the main thoroughfare. Now he could see what the noise was. It was the deep roar of a large crowd of grim people united by the same herd instinct. But from the fumes and other signs it was clear that vodka had helped. Like a single huge body, the procession crawled round a corner, bearing aloft before it a large portrait of Nicholas II in a gold iconostasis frame. This tsar was alien and remote to the Master, of course, but the people in the crowd who were carrying their idol in a frame and singing their national anthem were familiar enough. They smelt of ordinary human sweat, vodka and food undoubtedly, but in their moments of ecstasy and exultation they also emitted the distinctive, strong and pungent smell of hatred. And that was how it smelt now, this long snake of a crowd with the golden skull-portrait of their sovereign majesty. Not wishing to breathe the foul air of hatred, the Master lowered his eyes and set off quickly down the street.

But someone in the crowd recognised him. Someone who had removed his bowler hat and was now clutching it to his chest, barred Otto Meissner's way.

"Off with yer hat," he said.

"Swab German sausage!" came the shouts from the crowd. "You have come with the sword and shall die by the sword, Teuton!"

Otto Meissner stepped back and leaned against a lamp post. In the crowd he saw the pink, shaven, enrapt face of Ilya Chumasov. And immediately a young fellow in grammar school uniform jumped out and flung a stone at him shouting:

"Death to German spies!"

The stone clanged on the iron pipe just above Otto Meissner's head. He took a few more steps backwards, then turned and went down the alley. There were whistles and boos, but no one followed him. The Master worked his way under the clothes lines, stooping where there was heavy, wet washing, and suddenly caught sight of the washerwoman herself hanging up a sheet nearby,

standing on tiptoe and showing her generous, pink calves. He finally made his way through the obstructing lines and found himself in the quiet street again. The warehouse was still open, and the hunched, powdery man was carrying sacks of flour inside...

Two hours later the Master could be seen walking quickly along the top of the chalky slopes away from the receding town of corn chandlers and merchants. The blue, cloudless sky was immense, the gleaming white cliffs towered high. How small his dark, foreign figure looked amid this torrid expanse! The broad glittering river stretched out below like the last impassable frontier of his existence. He walked along this frontier which would not let him out to his country and to freedom. Suddenly he made up his mind and turned sharply away from it, setting off towards the opposite edge of the horizon.

Before him now lay hot expanses covered with ripe golden grain. The telegraph poles receded into the distance in an even gradually diminishing line. Beside them ran the dusty, well-trodden highroad. Clusters of men and carts piled high with sheaves moved along it. The sheaves were being taken to the threshing mill, and the men to the war. Otto Meissner walked past them and was surprised to see ordinary human sweat pouring down their sunburnt faces. They wiped them with their shirt sleeves. Sacks were hanging from straps on their backs. How extraordinary! The scene of the ripe summer and the earth's bounty open to the Master's gaze was full of the true divine grace. For the sun was shining and the sultry languor of the intense steppe heat caught the breathing of the marching men, their hot bodies moved energetically, the poor, patched, tattered clothing of the mobilised men moved on their bodies ... and soon these tattered rags and these healthy peasant bodies—oh, unbelievable truth—would be rotting under the ground, thus proving the futility of all human endeavour, toil and striving! "Look! Look!" Otto Meissner ordered himself. "Look at the columns of life marching before you to inevitable death. Am I to take part in this diabolical procession? What can I, a solitary humanitarian, do for them, for my wife and children, and for myself?"

The further he went towards the eastern edge of the

horizon, the denser and more viscous seemed the space in which he became immersed. Each step with which he forced himself into this space was like a stab from a knife plunging slowly into his chest, towards his heart. And so he walked for one day, two, three, feeling nothing but pain, spending the night in haystacks, quenching his thirst in rivers which he swam over indifferently, without removing his clothes. During this time he did not encounter the six-winged Seraph nor did he receive divine comfort from anything or anyone. And when, at the end of this goalless journey, he sat down on the edge of a harvested field, behind which the roofs of houses and the blue dome of a village church could be seen, and decided to put his revolver to use, he felt nothing but an immense sense of guilt to his wife and a slight physical pain as if from the brief touch of hot metal on his body. Metaphysics, that is to say, philosophy, to which he had always turned for consolation, recoiled from him at that moment, like a priest who with a poor devil sentenced to be hanged jumps back a second before the flimsy support collapses under the sentenced man's feet. Then came the darkness from which he emerged on a rainy night in the summer of 1912 on the wet, bending planks of the river jetty. The river lurking beside it was black and vast, and only its far reaches, separated from the jetty by many versts, shone in a strip of dull silver.

Did Otto Meissner possess the right, the human right, to dispose of himself in this way? After all, he had a wife and child, my future father, and through and from the latter me, his grandson, and through me there will be my children and grandchildren, my pupils, my good friends and their children, grandchildren and friends—a countless host of proud eyes of future Mankind. And how, putting it simply, could the noble Master of Philosophy have abandoned his wife and son just when militaristic sentiments were on the upsurge; what did he think before he abandoned those for whom he was the only mainstay in the whole world? Trying to understand my unknown grandfather, I ask: "What terrible thing happened at the misty dawn of your life, poor man? What awful blow to your heart lay at the root of your future defeat as a human being?"

Silence.

Time, that other time to which the straight beam of my eye has no access, is silent. And only in the lightning flashes of my imagination do I see a childhood different from my own. No ragged clothes handed down from grown-ups, but lovely clean suits made to measure, smelling fresh and sweet. He never felt the prickly cold of the frozen autumn ground, which had to be covered barefoot from home to school, because there was no footwear for children at home. He always wore smart new, or as good as new, laced boots, smelling sweetly of leather...

Then the mysterious moment of awakening in childhood which holds a kind of strange joy (as if any moment the sweet tenor of a trumpet will proclaim a victory): the pearly ripples of morning at the window, I am ordered up at once and out into the street to drive the cow to pasture, while he is brought a cup of hot chocolate in bed—at this happy hour of morning, childhood, innocence. I am told to graze the cow called Tamara until evening, and he, most probably, to practise scales on the piano. But our joy is equally great: the arrival of his beloved *Grossvater* and consequently an unexpected break in his music studies, and for me, what joy!—Our Chinese neighbour with the Russian wife asks me to take his grey donkey to graze with Tamara the cow. How proudly I ride through the village on it! Yet he may have a well-fed pony with a plaited mane languishing in a stable. But however naive my attempts to picture the luxury and comfort of the Master's childhood, I know that something happened to him, something that was not noticed by man or God and that marked the beginning of Otto Meissner's destruction, the end of which came in the summer of 1914. For he died then. He must have died, for there is and can be no other reason for his disappearance.

"To lose faith in human goodness is death to the soul, and it is dead from the moment it suffers this loss," comes his voice from the other side. I love these solemn maxims of his. For some time I have been hearing them everywhere, without the slightest effort on my part. Although he talks with me so kindly, I know I shall never guess the childhood secret that contains the seed of his mistrust and horror of the human world. However, while

not expecting him to reveal his secret, I can at least reveal mine, which is not quite the same, of course, but will bring us even closer together. And I, being somewhat older and perhaps more resilient and stronger than he, could probably be of considerable assistance to him now. After all that has happened on earth between his and my experience of life, I know that which he, a delicate and gentle metaphysician, could not know. For example, like the little pot-bellied devil that grandmother Olga liked talking about, there is also a dark, sinister whirlwind, and woe betide anyone who looks it up and down when it begins to grow! Nor can you stamp on it either, because it is not a cockroach or a dung-beetle, but the mysterious, elusive demon of evil and strife.

Let us get back to the subject in hand, however. I shall tell everything exactly as it happened, without prettifying this picture of childhood. I shall draw it with a thick "carpenter's pencil", as Vincent Van Gogh used to say. I remember that we were sleeping side by side on a rush mat, through the strips of which floated charcoal fumes from cracks in the pipes. Mother and her three children were sleeping the troubled sleep of people in wartime. I was the oldest man left at home. At that time I had just turned six. Mother woke me in the darkness and whispered in my ear, her sharp nails scratching my shoulder. She was so frightened that she could hardly speak. "The Ca-a-at. The Black Ca-a-at." Father was in the labour army at the Karaganda mines. Mother managed to support herself and her three children by buying unrefined rice, pounding it in a Korean foot mortar, and reselling it at a higher price. Evidently the word had got round that mother had lots of rice, money and other hidden treasures, but I remember that there was never more than a sackful of rice at a time, and that people came from the station, to whom mother would sell the rice, measuring it out carefully in an aluminium bowl. So the notorious Black Cats had decided to pay us a night visit. At that time stories were rife about whole families having their throats cut, people being robbed, hacked with axes and slashed with razors, and all these terrible goings-on were attributed to a powerful gang of Black Cats. They said that a cat came to the door at night, miaowing and scratching at the door, and when

the owner opened it he was struck down on the threshold with an axe... The thieves had come to our house in a cart, evidently hoping for a good haul. They did not miaow at the door but immediately began to shake it, not hard, but quietly, as if to work out the arrangement of bolts. As soon as I realised what was happening, a terrible fear gripped me like a pup by the scruff of the neck and flung me out of the warm bed. Like a young beast, I tore out of my mother's arms, not even realising that it was her—secure and kind, warm and bread-giving—and crawled away under a low bench in the corner of the hovel opposite the door. On the bench stood a primus and saucepans and under it an old iron pot with salt. I crawled into this only hiding place, rolling up into a ball next to the pot, and watched the flimsy, warped door of our abode dwelling that opened straight onto the street. Light showed through the cracks. The moon was shining brightly, but this did not deter the robbers, for our village lay in the backwoods of Kazakhstan, far from the front line. There was no military or police force in it to protect the inhabitants from marauders, so the later worked calmly and efficiently at night, driving round by cart to all the houses already marked down for robbing. I could see the straight, shining cracks in the old door, yet I was staring with dumb horror not at these pretty stripes, but at the moving piece of wire inserted between the door post and the door itself. They were searching for the hook so as to unlatch it. And now I recall what was probably the saddest and worst moment in my life. It has receded into the dim and distant past, of course, but the piercing wound that my heart received then has not fully healed and still aches to this day, giving it no peace, so I trust I shall be forgiven for this painful recollection. I can see the piece of bent wire twisting and twirling, getting closer and closer to the door hook, which, I knew, went very easily into the staple. Another second and the hook would be knocked out. I wet myself with fear. I was six years old and slept without trousers, so my clothes did not suffer. Only the iron pot with the chipped edge witnessed my disgrace. Many years have passed since then, but it is still with me, and for me fear is not only fear. It is guilt and filth. I hate it more than death, and I cannot forgive

the age in which I had to live my childhood like that, and the war for making me know fear. And black anger grips me whenever I feel this filth rising from deep inside me. At such moments I am capable of many foolish actions, and this is the difference between me and Otto Meissner: he was the enemy of all folly and wrathful action.

We were saved by a horse, the unknown horse on which the robbers came in search of our reputed riches. I do not know and would not like to think what the robbers would have done to us when they found nothing in the house but half a sack of rice, a pile of half-naked children amid wretched rags and a young woman dumb with fright in her underware. But suddenly this dear old horse, left untended, set off quietly along the road, dragging the rumbling cart after it. The thieves, who were busy round the house, did not notice at once that the horse had gone, and by the time they did it was already far away. Cursing loudly, they tore off in pursuit. There were three of them: two men and a woman. My mother saw them all through the little window. Later we heard that the horse had gone to the market and trotted up all on its own to the watchman by the railway station, who was armed with a double-barrelled rifle. "A miracle!" people say in such cases, or "Saved by the Lord". Be that as it may, we were saved indeed. From my corner I saw my father's old boots start running backwards and forwards over the room. Then the door opened wide, the rich moonlight flooded into the room, and mother's piercing cry rang out in the silent night: "Thie-eves! Uncle Nau-um, thie-eves!" Then the sound of tinkling glass. That was mother who had run out of the house in the boots and was banging on the neighbours' window with her knuckles.

The sound of the glass breaking and hitting the ground is still ringing in my ears. Mother's hand was bleeding, but here am I, a whole eternity afterwards, sitting at a big country table and thinking: if I loved my wife I must have known why, and that love will remain with me forever, even though it has been rejected. And the woman who aroused this love, slim, dainty, flaxen-haired, greedy for something she will never get; let her go far away from me, I shall still remember her, and we shall

see which of us is worse off. Let her say how she pities me, telling others what a failure I am. Buried himself in the country, gone to seed, even keeps a cow. Yet it is I, not her, who knows clearly what I will and what I never shall permit myself, even if the flood or goodness knows what else comes tomorrow. But that is a trick, a game for an idle mind, for no one can know the future. It has not been given to us by nature to do so. Perhaps we are being tested. We have been brought into the world at a most difficult time and are being tested for fidelity, truth and beauty. Although I was born a little before the beginning of the war, my true year of birth was and always will be 1941. The two or three years before this can be regarded as lost forever, unrealised, like a pale base on which a different picture has been drawn.

## 10

My country life amid peace and quiet has been most successful. Teaching has brought me great satisfaction, although it was not easy at first. The stove in my house smoked and I had not thought to get myself felt boots for the winter. I used to walk to school up to my knees in snow, making deep holes in which my shoes often slipped off. It was hard to get used to the strong-willed headmistress of our small school, who had been there for twenty years and was unfavourably disposed towards me, believing that I would make use of my family connections and try to undermine her authority. But in the second half of the school year Alexandra Tikhonovna's attitude towards me changed completely and instead of her previous reprimands, she had nothing but praise for me. It turned out that I had excellent methods and a highly professional way of teaching. I was even entrusted with such a responsible task as collecting the wages from the district centre, where I went by sledge with the school watchman Aslyam Bigbulatov. In short, the school year has passed successfully for me, although not without the usual difficulties of getting used to new conditions of life.

There were memorable, so to say, days and events or simply special, precious states of mind, which I shall

never forget. I shall always remember, for example, the end of September, warm and splendid, with short and violent thundery showers unusual for the time of year, after which mushrooms sprang up all over the forest clearings. In my free time I went to the forest and brought back heavy baskets filled right up to the handles with young brown mushrooms and big, perfectly shaped white ones with dark, matt caps. I took all my findings to Nuria, the old woman next door, from whom I got milk, or to Aslyam the watchman. During this time I came to know the special, piercing joy of self-renunciation and unity with the golden September silence rustling and swirling with falling leaves. Also at that time four policemen who had come in a jeep from the district centre descended on my house. They went through my papers and asked me questions about myself. It turned out that there was a nation-wide search going on for a dangerous criminal who unfortunately had fiery red hair and looked extremely like me. At that time I wore a small beard and moustache, but had to shave off these adornments so the policemen could see for themselves that I was not concealing a criminal countenance behind them. Our official encounter ended with me frying up a large pan of mushrooms, while one of the lads drove to the shop and brought back two bottles of vermouth. I was joyful, happy and generous then, and things always go well for happy people.

At that time, the end of the ninth month of the year, I could think quietly and dispassionately of such things as happiness, of such a trifle in this world as myself, and of death, an indisputable fact and our lawful right. Reflecting calmly on how my life had worked out, on my wife and so on, I assured myself that what everyone calls happiness may not exist, but what does exist is the chance to adopt a calm, fearless and benevolent attitude to everything. Then a person acquires a state engendered by his will alone that he can call a happy one, even if the woman he loves has been unfaithful to him. And at that time I thought particularly often of my unknown German grandfather, the Master of Philosophy, and began to read the half-decayed sheets of his notes.

I turned out to resemble him in many ways, which is perfectly natural, of course, the result of heredity. For

example, in the morning I like drinking coffee, not tea. And I too am subject to fits of elegiac melancholy, when I feel as lonely as a white dolphin that has broken away from the shoal, but then I remember about the existence of other elegists, unknown to me, and my good humour returns together with the thought that we are all brothers.

The fine September days were followed by a rainy October. Sugar beet harvesting began at the state farm, and the villagers also had to dig up their own potatoes. The school was deserted. The children helped their parents or led by us, the teachers, went out to the sugar beet fields. Then I got into trouble. Not having any rubber boots, I splashed about in the mud in my smart Yugoslav shoes, as a result of which I went down with a terrible cold. I stayed at home for two weeks and hardly saw a soul, because harvesting time had claimed everyone, large and small, and only one or other of my colleagues dropped in to see me quickly and Nuria, the old woman, brought me hot food, thick, health-giving kaymak cream, and put on my samovar. So in the long, dreary evenings, when the rain fell outside and time seemed to have stopped, swallowed up by the darkness and bad weather, and all that remained of my life was anguish, and the four dark-brown, half-naked warriors with spears in their hands advanced towards me, rising one after another from the feverish depths of my delirium only to sink back again—in these evenings I would wake up from the nightmares of my heavy, unpleasant sleep, drink a little water from the kettle, and read Otto Meissner's half-decayed papers, taking them from an old school bag without fastenings. I took one sheet at a time, read it through, and when I had managed to get the gist of it, placed it on the window-sill. The pile soon grew quite high.

One day I was lying with a clearer head than before, and read:

"...there was a lamb lying on the shoulder of a native I encountered. I wondered for what sacrifice that poor lamb was doomed. And whatever the sacrifice was, I felt mortally sorry for the poor creature.

"...A nightingale was trilling, uttering sounds like sweet kisses. I felt the small bird was kissing the face of the rising sun. And in this singing, innocent kiss, like

brief touch of putting one's lips to the face of a child, I discovered at last something eternal, something that will always be in our world."

The house where I was living had belonged earlier to an old Tartar woman whose grown-up children live in Leningrad. One day the old woman died and was buried on the same day in accordance with Moslem tradition, a post with a crude crescent moon hewn on it being placed on her grave. The window panes gradually disappeared from the old woman's derelict house, the roof began to collapse, and the mice nibbled away the wallpaper. Then I moved in, the glass was put back in the windows, the walls were repapered, and the house gained a new lease of life. But the local gangs of evil spirits who had taken a fancy to it must have remained, because the house was full of strange sounds, rustling, sighs, muttering under the stove, and moaning under the floor boards, and the lobby door was always banging with incredible force all by itself. On the evening when I was reading about the nightingales, the lobby door banged, but after that the door into the living room began to open slowly with a cat-like whine...

I stared hard at the door over the school bag, which was standing on a chair by my bed, and a multitude of thoughts rushed into my inspired, fevered head. I remembered that a frame had suddenly fallen off the wall recently and the glass crashed onto the bench; it contained an Arabic prayer inscribed in gold leaf, that used to comfort the old mistress of the house. I also thought that anyone capable of writing like that about nightingales and lambs could not have been a good-for-nothing, and I imagined the bandits' horse trotting along the barely visible path at night, shaking its head miserably and keeping its meek eyes fixed on the ground beneath its feet. All this rushed through my head, while the door that I was watching with such inexplicable tension and hope creaked slowly open.

Eventually the door opened wide and into the room came a smiling, grey-eyed archangel with the homely face of the school watchman, Aslyam-agai, unfastening his wet, drooping wings from his shoulders as he walked. He had brought me half a bucket of fresh horse meat, and immediately set about lighting the stove...

All that was last autumn. Now it is May and the last few days of the school year are flitting brightly past. The summer holidays will soon be here. And I am thinking that now I shall always be able to earn my daily bread, properly and honestly. The children from Tataro-Krapivensky and Siniye-Vershki, who walk four kilometers to our school, seem to approve of my teaching methods. Which are extremely simple, by the way. I tell them not only about wars, uprisings, invasions and strife, the intrigues of tyrants and the mistakes of famous generals, but about the masterpieces that were produced by artists when these events were taking place. In this way I try to give the pupils an idea of History as the sum total of creation and self-destruction, sacrifice and crime. Let them feel on their delicate, young faces the warmth and light of the distant future, when cruelty shall be forgotten, happiness shall reign and the single chain of Goodness, Mercy and Creation shall be joined at last.

But let us return to the present... A warm May evening with nightingales singing in the hazel bushes and drooping willow thickets by the river. The ones nearest are louder and those further away quieter. It is as if each tiny singer has its own estate, the size of which is calculated according to the natural length of its song. Each joins in the choir at a suitable moment, determining this moment with its flawless musical instinct, taste and inborn sense of counterpoint. A solemn nightingale fugue floats over the spring earth, swirling together with the apple blossom. I hear it, yet do not hear it. I am alive, yet have long since left this earth—and see no cause for regretting it. It is an echo, just a nightingale echo flying on the crest of the May sunrise, and the mighty waves of time are rolling away, bearing the birds' inspired voices to the shores of other ages. But I am already interwoven, like a thin strand of sound, in this eternal music.

I listen to the nightingale concerts with a quiet and modest feeling of pride that by dint of hard spiritual endeavour I have succeeded in understanding the goodness of Otto Meissner, Master of Philosophy. One day in Moscow, long ago when I was rushing round the hot city, almost fainting with weakness, savage grief and confusion, a kind of mental ghost appeared beside me in a square or a trolleybus, I don't remember exactly

where. Bending to whisper in my unhappy ear, he said in my own voice that I was a tiny creature, very small, almost totally inconspicuous, and that no one was watching me from above so I need not feel ashamed of the disgrace of compromise, that I should bury everything deep down in my heart and quietly do what I want. "You'll manage somehow." And looking round me I saw that you can manage "somehow". But I am glad that I gave my ex-wife's boyfriend a punch in the nose and left them and came to live here. And most of all I am glad that no one forced me to do it. And everything that followed was also of my own free will. I chose it all myself...

"But is that true, grandson? Did you really make the choice yourself? Did I not take you quietly by the hand and lead you here? Remember how you first got the idea of moving to these parts, dear boy."

"Yes, Otto Meissner! I decided to visit my brother and get your papers to read. That was how it all started, you are right."

"So you see, everything in this world of ours has a cause, a connection and its own special meaning. True spirituality is imperishable. It renders assistance when necessary, easily overcoming even the barrier of death."

"But was your death a barrier between us? On the contrary, it became the prologue to our relationship. Without it I could not have come to believe so utterly in your goodness, Otto Meissner."

"Then let us regard this mundane fact with equanimity, calmly. The more so because such an instantaneous metamorphosis makes it possible to have long, long talks with one's intelligent grandson! And this is no less pleasant than, say, chatting during one's lifetime to one's golden-headed grandsons who have not yet been born. And you know about that, as I do, and they will find it out too. It is to this end that the sweet-sounding written word lives, resounds, and wings its way through mortal time."

# About the Authors

## NIKOLAI YEVDOKIMOV

Nikolai Yevdokimov was born in 1922 in Byelorussia, but has spent most of his life in Moscow. Talking to him and listening to his lectures and discussions with students at the Institute of Literature, where he has taught for many years, you would never think that this gentle, cultured man had endured the bitter ordeals of front-line warfare, that during the Second World War he was a divisional reconnaissance officer who often went behind enemy lines, was seriously wounded and then returned to active service.

After the war he studied at the Institute of Literature in Moscow, together with such well-known modern Soviet writers as Yuri Bondarev, Yuri Trifonov, Vladimir Tendryakov and Grigory Baklanov. He soon became an established writer. His first story was published in 1945. Since then he has written about fifteen novels and stories and scenarios for several popular films.

One might well expect the exciting biographical material of his wartime experiences to appear directly in his works. This is not the case, however. Nikolai Yevdokimov admits that he avoids writing directly about his life on the front. "I am interested in something else: in the effect that war has had in general, how it has ruined people's lives over more than one generation—and still does, although we are sometimes not aware of it..."

The writer remains true to this theme in all his best works: in the novels *A Necessary Man* (1967) and *An Incident in the Life of Vladimir Vassilievich Makhonin* (1981) and in the story *Strastnaya Square* (1977) included in this volume.

"In *Strastnaya Square*, I tried to write about a good person, an ideal one, if you like", Yevdokimov says. "By that I mean a person who has overcome suffering. The following example may not be particularly apt, but I think it is easily understood: Christ is dear to believers not so much for his teaching as for the sufferings that he endured for his convictions... A writer does not have the right to ignore human suffering..."

## VLADIMIR LICHUTIN

Vladimir Lichutin was born in 1940 on the White Sea coast. Here on the bleak shores of Pomorye Novgorodians who fled from the power of the boyars began to settle in the twelfth century. They founded towns, made wooden boats and sailed out to sea in these frail vessels, ploughing their way through the ice of the Arctic Ocean, trading with the Scandinavians, fishing and seal hunting. These freedom-loving Russian Northerners (specialists today call them Russian Vikings), who knew neither the invasion of the Golden Horde nor the slavery of serfdom which fettered Russia right up to the nineteenth century, became called Pomors.

They lived as a secluded ethnic group, cherishing the customs and beliefs of their ancestors, which is why the natives of these parts have such a detailed knowledge of their family tree. Vladimir Lichutin is proud of the fact that his family on his father's side is descended from the seafarer Mikhail Lichutin, whose name was given to an island by Novaya Zemlya, and to Yakov Lichutin whom the great eighteenth-century scholar Lomonosov, also a Pomor, took as his helmsman on the first Northern Expedition of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

It was only natural that the Pomors—their lands, traditions and everydaylife—became the object of Vladimir Lichutin's research when he graduated from the Journalism Department at the Leningrad University, and later the heroes of his stories and novels, which already number more than ten. The lives of the inhabitants in the imaginary Pomor village of Vazitsa, intertwine with the past and produce the most unusual dramatic clashes in the present day. Critics often compare the world that emerges from Lichutin's pen with Faulkner's Yokhapatawpha Country. The writer himself, however, remarks modestly that "I set my own tasks. Firstly, I try to show life as I see it, in all its pain, in all the richness of the linguistic environment and in the music of nature, for everything, the sky, the earth, the sea and each human dwelling, has its own music... Secondly, I believe that through the life of a single person, however outwardly ordinary he may be, one can trace the life of all mankind. And that is what I try to do. I try to show human life as it is, without distortion, remembering that truth moves life towards self-purification. And this movement towards perfection, albeit brief and minute, is the writer's *raison d'etre...*"

## NIKOLAI KUZMIN

Nikolai Kuzmin was born in 1927 in the Altai, the son of a peasant woman and an unskilled labourer at a metalworks. His very first long story *By the Steep Gully* (1956) about the inhabitants of an Altai collective farm, attracted the attention of one of the founders of Soviet literature, Vsevolod Ivanov, and shortly afterwards Ivanov and the Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov, nominated him for membership of the Writers' Union. Nikolai Kuzmin has

published sixteen books of prose and on several occasions his stories have been proclaimed the finest works of the year.

The story *Sweet Moment of Success* (1972) was no exception for Kuzmin. He had already written a novel about footballers entitled *Two Points To Win* (1972) and one about boxers *Winner Takes All* (1967). Himself an ardent sportsman, he has been a successful downhill skier and boxer in his time, as well as playing football and swimming. As he himself admits, Nikolai Kuzmin loves sport, because sport is able to show a person's true character. "You cannot reach the finish by dishonest, roundabout means," says the author of *Sweet Moment of Success*. "I detest insolence and servility in people and regard a sense of self-respect as the highest human virtue. In my books about sport, and not only sport, I write about the courage of defending one's self-respect. And this is sometimes not such an easy thing to do! Still, I echo my characters words to the reader that it is better to be broken than to bow. This is the main sentiment and thought behind all of my writing."

## VALERY MURZAKOV

Valery Murzakov was born in 1940 in the town of Omsk in Siberia, where he still lives today. He lost his parents as a child which is why he became independent at an early age, working as a stevedore on the River Ob, a shepherd and a driller. Later, after receiving an education, he trained to be a geodesist and worked in cold, remote areas of Siberia and the Soviet Far North. This difficult profession requires exceptional stamina and courage.

The experience that he had accumulated over the years and his personal attitude to life demanded an outlet, a creative interpretation. Valery Murzakov began to write. It was a late beginning, and his first story was published in 1975. Since then he has published four more books of stories. One of them, *The Family* (1976), has been translated into several European languages. Today Murzakov's name is well-known to readers. His story *We Can Walk Now, Mum*, published in 1979, was a great success.

In Murzakov's stories we keep catching glimpses of a ginger-headed giant, who, like all big, strong people, is well-disposed to those around him. A kind of mischievousness, the product of an excess of spiritual robustness, makes the writer, like the artists of the Middle Ages, often include a self-portrait in his multi-figured compositions, for this big, kind man is Valery Murzakov himself. Talking about himself and his writing, Murzakov recalls with special emotion the time he spent on the construction of the Toktogul hydro-electric power station in Kirghizia, high up in the mountains. "I, a mine-surveyor, and my theodolite were insured by some first-class mountaineers. Or, to put it simply, they tied me to them with rope," the writer explained with the gentle humour so typical of him. "So I worked over a sheer drop tied in this way. When I was climbing up the first time, I told myself it would be the last. But then I got used to it.

"It was the same with writing. It is difficult and frightening to pick up the pen at first. Then the feeling of fear recedes. And you want to write something you will not be ashamed of for the people you worked side by side with, the people who insured you..."

## ANATOLY KIM

The name of Anatoly Kim became known comparatively recently. His first stories were published in 1973. Since then the writer has produced four books of prose, each of which bears the imprint of their author's strong and distinctive talent.

Anatoly Kim was born in 1939 in Southern Kazakhstan, but he is Korean, the great-grandson of those who settled in the virgin lands along the Russian banks of the Amur in the latter half of the last century. The descendants of these resolute and industrious people can be found today in the Soviet Far East, Central Asia and the harsh Yakutia. They are usually engaged in cereal and cotton-growing, hunting and gold mining.

As if following in his ancestors' footsteps, Kim has lived in the Far East and on Kamchatka and Sakhalin. He thinks and writes in Russian, but his ethnic origins are, of course, inevitably reflected in his writing. In his early work, as he himself acknowledges, he laid special emphasis on the "exotic" quality of his personal experiences, making use of fables and allegories with a specifically Korean flavour. One is struck in his prose by the strong pictorial element, the precision and the interest in colour. Evidently this has been brought by his first profession, for before the Institute of Literature Kim studied at an art school.

In *The Nightingale Echo* (1977) Anatoly Kim has taken an important qualitative step forward. Here fantastic ideas and fantastic metaphors have become natural and organic for him. He sets himself the new tasks of "writing not the story of a life, but the story of the spirit," "of tracing and showing the equal value of past and present." He develops and extends the limits of the world created by him far beyond the framework of a simple fable. The author defines the philosophical tasks which he tackles in *The Nightingale Echo* as follows: "I believe that the activity of every living person prepares the future, that the shape of the future depends on each one of us, for all of us are linked through our ancestors not only with the past, but also with the future. If only for the fact that it is our children who will be living in the world of tomorrow, that tomorrow cannot be a matter of indifference to us.

"All our activity, and this is particularly true of a writer's work, is that of preparing the future. This is what I have tried to talk about in my story..."